# *Character and . . .*

## Crisis

**Volume 8 / 2022**

Wendt Character Initiative

UNIVERSITY *of* DUBUQUE

## Editors

*The faculty essays presented here emerge from a semester-long process of reading and writing together in an environment of critique and review. Nevertheless, this invited journal of essays represents the authors' views and not necessarily the views of the Wendt Center for Character Education or the University of Dubuque.*

## Contact Information

## Copyright Notice

# *Character and . . .*

# Crisis

# Character and Crisis

Annalee R. Ward

Listen to the news and you'll be convinced we live in a constant state of crisis. A global pandemic that kills or sickens millions and eats away at economic safety dominates our psyches. Supply chain challenges affect daily living. Inflation brings its own kind of pain. Political polarization stretches every issue to a breaking point. Gun violence devastates communities. Brain health concerns are on the rise. Global conflicts destroy peaceful living and inflict fear and suffering on so many. Worldwide we continue to discuss the challenges of climate change.[1] Add to the general focus specific hurricanes, earthquakes, and fires, and a state of crisis in the world has become the norm. Yet, humans continue to live hope-filled lives, looking to the future even while the present may be painful.

Certainly, having a clear sense of purpose, a telos, guides that hopefulness. But another piece of it is living out of a strength of character where virtues such as perseverance, integrity, and compassion contribute to the lens of hopefulness, turning that hopefulness into its own virtue. To face a crisis with a strong moral character involves encountering crisis in such a way as to find the strength to "keep calm and carry on," as the World War II adage encouraged.

In this issue of *Character and Crisis*, the authors consider how various trends in culture such as divisiveness, toxic work culture, and social influencers may portend a crisis. In addition, one author discusses the present COVID-19 crisis. In pairing crisis with character, they think about better ways to move forward. By way of introduction to the articles, I'd like to explore more about the nature of crisis, its application in this journal issue, and the path toward hope.

## Uncovering Dimensions of Crisis

The frequent casual use of the term "crisis" and its growing applications render it difficult to define. Physicist Benjamin Topper and crisis

management expert Patrick Lagadec suggest that traditionally crisis theory dealt with anything that disturbed the sense of "normalcy." However, in recent years the growth of global events at a "mega" scale call for new ways of thinking about crisis. Large-scale crises affect organizations and institutions and the broader society, but a crisis can be personal as well. They might be communal and public in nature or private and isolated. In any case, crises are growing in scale and in number of dimensions (Topper and Lagadec). To attempt to define crisis requires considering those various dimensions including the surprising, the uncertain, the time-sensitive, and the emotional overlay of fear or threat (Bhasin).

Seeing crises through the lens of "un-ness," crises scholar Arjen Boin describes them as "situations that are unwanted, unexpected, unprecedented, and almost unmanageable and that cause widespread disbelief and uncertainty" (167). Boin points out the threat inherent in crises. Similarly, Robert R. Ulmer et al. in looking at the various definitions of crisis note the presence of threat as one of several aspects of their understanding. Citing the 1963 work of C.F. Hermann, they note that all crises include an "element of surprise, threat, and short response time" (5). Keeping the focus at the organizational level, they define crisis as follows:



*Dimensions of crisis*

> An organizational crisis is a specific, *unexpected,* and *nonroutine* [sic] event or series of events that create high levels of *uncertainty* and simultaneously present an organization with both *opportunities* for and *threats* to its *high-priority goals.* (7)

They further distinguish between intentional crises such as terrorism or hostile takeovers and unintentional crises such as natural disasters or economic downturns.

Definitions of crises can be found in a variety of research areas including psychology, sociology, business, mathematics, political science (Boin 15), and communication. The variety of disciplines add to our understanding through lenses that include concepts of disaster studies, risk management, chaos theory, and even revolution (Walby). The psychological studies contribute especially to our understanding of personal crises.

One of our authors, Josh Thomas, commented ironically, "Americans have been enculturated in an individualistic mindset which means there is no crisis unless I am personally touched by it" (Wendt Research Team Meeting).

A number of scholars stress the personal lens. For example, psychologist Jim Taylor defines a crisis this way: "An event or situation that arises suddenly or reaches a tipping point in its severity that has the effect of significantly disrupting lives and threatening the status quo, and that may also have long-term, harmful consequences on individuals or groups." Crises are unexpected, create instability, replace the familiar with uncertainty, and cause distress and urgency.

Philosopher Pat Gehrke assigns the label of egoism to his definition, arguing that we need to include the way people interpret or construct the crisis with language and experience it through the personal, subjective lens. He defines a crisis this way: "the egoistic experience of a constructed event that comes as a surprise and poses a moment of judgement perceived to be of heightened importance" (134).

Somewhat similar to these, but perhaps one of the broadest definitions the authors in this journal use comes from Beth McCaw, a professor of ministry at the University of Dubuque. Using her training in crisis counseling, she describes: "A *crisis* develops when the experience of real or perceived *stressors* (demands) exceeds the real or perceived *resources* (capacities) to cope with those stressors."



*Balance of resources versus stressors in leading to crisis*

Embedded in each of these definitions, either overt or implied, is a dimension of emotion. Strong emotions often originate in the fears that emerge in a time of crisis—fears of the unknown, of chaos, of change (Bengtson 5). Stress, loss, instability, urgency, and the unknown all contribute to growing emotions of fear, anger, disappointment, discouragement, and deep sadness if not depression. The emotions are both a result of the crisis and can be a part of the crisis. Truly, a crisis is multi-dimensional and calls for response that is holistic, acknowledging the surprising, the uncertain, and the emotions involved.

## Responding to a Crisis with Character

Whole industries have emerged to address crisis communication and disaster management particularly for the organizational or societal scales. When those in power use deliberate communication strategies that clearly inform people, stressors decrease. Psychologist Marije H. Bakker and colleagues note, "this information also reduces affective reactions. Knowledge can restore a sense of control, what might lead to less worries about a crisis situation and more adequate behavior" (122). Responsible and responsive communication reflects an ethical approach to crisis response.

Ethics, values, and character particularly emerge in how crises are managed. Ulmer et al. remind us,

> Ethics and values are always part of a crisis. This includes questions of responsibility and accountability; free flows of information; and a caring, humane response. . . . An ethical response to a crisis . . . can help bolster an organization's image and reputation and ultimately help lead an organization toward renewal. (209)

One hopes the "humane response" is not motivated by the potential image boost. Rather, a caring responsiveness engages virtues of compassion and empathy, for example.

*The consequences of crises most heavily fall on those with fewer resources, less power, and less ability to manage negative effects.*

Crises have a way of exacerbating power differences. For it is in crises that inequities, power imbalances (Janzen 21), and "gaps in resources" become more evident (Reddam and Azevedo 11). The consequences of crises most heavily fall on those with fewer resources, less power, and less ability to manage negative effects (Walby 2). An ethical response will then be aware of this tendency and work hard to bring justice in resource distribution and in helping people.

The articles in this issue address crisis from a wide range of the general to the specific, from the societal to the organizational, to the personal. While they vary in focus, each reminds us of the role character can play in addressing a crisis of whatever scope. Each one of us, whether we are private citizens or leaders of an organization, can accept the challenge to

live lives of good character that will affect the people around us and the situations of crisis we encounter.

> *Each one of us . . . can accept the challenge to live lives of good character.*

With an x-ray focus, Josh Thomas takes a look at the big picture. He reflects on cultural crises diagnosed through the evidence of fractures between individuals and in broader societal divisions within institutions such as politics and sports. These divisions are amplified by the role the media play. The willingness to take in information without considering the source or one's own biases, and the lack of positive leadership contribute to the fissures between people. The divisiveness may result in or even be caused by fear, and fear works its way out whether in visible behaviors (often negative) or in physiological consequences. Thomas also explores how declining commitments to virtuous character carries the double-edged sword of being both a cause of division and a result of division. But "doctor" Thomas brings practical wisdom to this growing crisis by suggesting seven strategies to use for beginning the healing process in encounters with others. Character remains a central ingredient to positive ways forward.

One of the drivers of this issue's theme, *Crisis*, originated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The United States' management of the pandemic quickly became fraught with division even as it called for adherence to the direction of science and not politics. Ken Turner, a science educator, steps into the contentiousness with a calm explanation of how science, practiced with integrity, works. As a process-based resource, scientific discovery and forward movement occur based on existing evidence. During the pandemic, that evidence may not be immediately available as it continues to grow and change, leading to new knowledge. He illustrates this with several step-by-step policy changes, arguing that they were required each time new information was uncovered. This process demonstrates integrity. Conclusions evolve when new information is revealed, and integrity remains even though the answers may now differ. It is not a given that science is always a trustworthy process based on integrity, however. It requires scientists to be ethical in the process and to contribute their own commitment to ethical practices.

We move from Thomas' broad vision of cultural crisis and character-based healing and Turner's passion for scientific integrity to help guide

communities at a time of crisis to Michelle Grace's exploration of the business world where toxic cultures become crises. Using examples from Amazon, NASA, Theranos, and VW, she defines and illustrates various aspects of toxicity that lead to crisis. Employee-based and especially leader-driven actions bring hope for positive change. Rooting action in good character helps avoid the problems of treating employees poorly, squashing feedback, lying, and misrepresentation that lead to a crisis in an organization.

Change is possible but requires character that is rooted in a vision for creating a workplace where people matter, truth is told, and the environment is safe and productive. That doesn't happen without thoughtful character-filled leadership and employees. Steven Fink, a scholar of crisis communication, writes: "The one thing that is always needed in any crisis situation, and that sometimes is in critically short supply, is leadership—bold, decisive leadership" (286). He reiterates Grace's call for character when he challenges leaders to "rise to the occasion and take charge of your crisis with confidence, conviction, and character" (287). And if one is not a leader, Grace illustrates the challenging path of whistleblowing.

The kind of courageous character it takes to be a whistleblower is at work in quieter ways in Molly Hein's essay. She examines the paradoxical environment of mass communication impacting single lives to the point where, she argues, social influence is becoming a

*Character remains a central ingredient to positive ways forward.*

crisis and calls for a character-infused response. For example, consider the growth and influence of TikTok, a social media site allowing 13 year-olds to have accounts. It "grew by 75 percent in 2020, making it the world's most-downloaded app that year" (Williamson). In a world where people proudly proclaim their individuality and freedom, Molly Hein considers social influencers' growing power to shape our character. Whether overt or subtle influence, this phenomenon seeps into most mediated experiences, impacting wants, desires, and actions. Fear of missing out, or FOMO, drives people to think, try, buy, or do just like they saw in the video or picture. For example, ". . . [V]iral 'TikTok Challenges' have been cited as inspiring children to vandalize and threaten their schools, follow starvation 'Corpse Bride' diets and asphyxiate themselves. Teen girls have been repeatedly targeted by child predators" (Williamson).

When FOMO becomes a controlling force, we risk yielding our very identity, even disengaging our character commitments. Hein challenges us to recognize this force at work particularly on social media and reengage our commitments to becoming better people who appreciate their own uniqueness.

Given the variety of crises the authors have identified, we could easily be overwhelmed and want to shut down. But a number of people point out that there is opportunity for positive changes that might emerge in response to a crisis (Fink).

## Moving Through Crisis Toward Hope

The challenges, problems, and, yes, trauma that crises cause are not to be underrated, but it is also possible to find hopefulness emerging from crises. Scott Hagley, a missiologist, considers the role crisis plays in knowing God and in creating space for God to work. "[W]e see that God-encounters precipitate crisis while various crises of life cultivate the kind of creativity and attentiveness needed to know or encounter God in a new way" (34). A key part of understanding a crisis, for Hagley, means leaning in to discoveries inherent in the event or events. These "disruptive experiences guide learning . . . " (54). Disruption in the form of a crisis poses possibilities for growth.

*Disruption in the form of a crisis poses possibilities for growth.*

That growth can happen both individually and communally. Our respondent, rhetorical scholar Mark A. E. Williams, wisely advises us to "to see the moment—*clearly*; to make judgments—*wisely*; and to act—*reasonably and responsibly*" (83). Drawing on historical wisdom, he encourages us to engage community resources with humility. The nature of crises may vary dramatically, but the character it takes to endure them and emerge, even thrive, is a common theme.

Psychologist Jim Taylor explores the word for crisis in other languages. He looks at the Hebrew meaning as suggesting something broken, but he also argues it "denotes a birth, indicating something positive emerging from an episode of pain." Taylor also cites John F. Kennedy's reference to the Chinese characters that compose the word for crisis: "When written in Chinese, the word 'crisis' is composed of two characters—one represents danger, and the other represents opportunity." While this may be reading too much into the

characters, it does highlight how so many people are able to emerge from a crisis with hope.

Simplistic or naïve hope is not what is suggested. That kind of hope cognitive scientist Scott Barry Kaufman calls "toxic positivity" and a "denial of reality." He argues we need to look to Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl's call for "tragic optimism" (Frankl 139). Tragic optimism is rooted in the search for meaning and involves focusing on the human potential to turn "suffering into a human achievement;" seek to better oneself; and "take responsible action" (140). Tragic optimism leans into the belief that people can learn and grow.

*Possibilities for hope*

Crises powerfully shape character and are shaped by character. Ethical, virtuous leadership in difficult times provides a way forward and guides toward the opportunities of growth through and from the crisis. But for the many people who find themselves in a crisis but not in a leadership role, good character still serves well. Whether it is reacting to political and cultural division with open-mindedness, compassion, and patience or to a worldwide pandemic with grace and cooperation, or to an organizational crisis with whistleblowing, or managing one's own response to the pressures of influencers, strength of character serves well. As we all face the challenges around us, may we lean into the trouble with the tragic optimism that finds meaning in the suffering and emerges with hope to serve others.

---

*Annalee R. Ward is the Director of the Wendt Center for Character Education at the University of Dubuque in Dubuque, Iowa. Through programming and curriculum, the Wendt Character Initiative seeks to shape character for lives of purpose. Ward researches and writes on communication, ethics, and popular culture.*

## Notes

[1] For example, The World Bank's 2021 Groundswell report suggests 216 million people could be forced to move in the coming years because of severe climate changes (*Climate Change*).

# Works Cited

Bakker, Marije H., et al. "Deciding to Help: Effects of Risk and Crisis Communication." *Journal of Contingencies & Crisis Management*, vol. 26, no. 1, Mar. 2018, pp. 113–26. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12155.

Bengtson, Jason. "Chapter 1: What Does a Crisis Look Like?" *Library Technology Reports*, vol. 57, no. 7, Oct. 2021, pp. 5–6.

Bhasin, Hitesh. "8 Different Types of Crisis." *Marketing91*, 17 Feb. 2019, https://www.marketing91.com/types-of-crisis/.

Boin, Arjen. "Lessons from Crisis Research." *International Studies Review*, vol. 6, no. 1, Spring 2004, pp. 165–74. EBSCOhost, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1521-9488.2004.393_2.x.

*Climate Change Could Force 216 Million People to Migrate Within Their Own Countries by 2050*. The World Bank, 13 Sept. 2021, https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/09/13/climate-change-could-force-216-million-people-to-migrate-within-their-own-countries-by-2050.

Fink, Steven. *Crisis Communications: The Definitive Guide to Managing the Message*. McGraw-Hill Professional Publishing, 2013.

Frankl, Victor E. *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*. 3rd ed., Simon and Shuster, 1984.

Gehrke, Pat J. "The Crisis Fallacy: Egoism, Epistemology, and Ethics in Crisis Communication and Preparation." *Communication Ethics and Crisis: Negotiating Differences in Public and Private Spheres*, edited by S. Alyssa Groom and Janie Harden Fritz, Fairleigh Dickinson UP, pp. 133–59. *EBSCOhost*, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=433596&site=ehost-live.

Grace, Michelle. "Character & Crisis: Toxic Workplaces and Culture Change." *Character and . . . Crisis*, vol. 8, 2022, pp. 44-62.

Hagley, Scott. *Eat What Is Set Before You: A Missiology of the Congregation in Context*. Urban Loft Publishers, 2019.

Hein, Molly. "Social Influencers: FOMO and Identity Crisis." *Character and . . . Crisis*, vol. 8, 2022, pp. 63-80.

Janzen, David W. "The Ambivalence of Crisis." *English Studies in Canada*, vol. 44, no. 3, Sept. 2018, pp. 19–23. EBSCOhost, https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2018.0009.

Kaufman, Scott Barry. "The Opposite of Toxic Positivity." *The Atlantic*, 18 Aug. 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2021/08/tragic-optimism-opposite-toxic-positivity/619786/.

McCaw, Beth. *Crisis*. Wendt Research Team Meeting, 16 Sept. 2021, University of Dubuque.

Reddam, Matt, and Sandra Azevedo. "Trauma-Informed Leadership through All Stages of Crisis: Reflections Following the Camp Fire." *Leadership*, Dec. 2019, pp. 8–11. *EBSCOhost*, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=139873680&site=ehost-live.

Taylor, Jim. "Under the Microscope: What Is a Crisis?" *Psychology Today*, 19 Mar. 2020, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-power-prime/202003/under-the-microscope-what-is-crisis.

Thomas, Josh. "Healing a Fractured World." *Character and . . . Crisis*, vol. 8, 2022, pp. 12-27.

---. Wendt Research Team Meeting, 15 Oct. 2021, University of Dubuque.

Topper, Benjamin, and Patrick Lagadec. "Fractal Crises - A New Path for Crisis Theory and Management." *Journal of Contingencies & Crisis Management*, vol. 21, no. 1, Mar. 2013, pp. 4–16. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12008.

Turner, Ken. "Science and Integrity: A Pandemic Lens." *Character and . . . Crisis*, vol. 8, 2022, pp. 28-43.

Ulmer, Robert R., et al. *Effective Crisis Communication: Moving from Crisis to Opportunity*. 2nd ed., SAGE Publications, 2011.

Walby, Sylvia. *Crisis*. Polity Press, 2015.

Williams, Mark A. E. "Surviving a Crisis by Not Being an Idiot." *Character and . . . Crisis*, vol. 8, 2022, pp. 81-94.

Williamson, Elizabeth. "A Child's TikTok Stardom Opens Doors. Then a Gunman Arrives." *The New York Times*, 17 Feb. 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/17/us/politics/tiktok-ava-majury.html.

# Healing a Fractured World

Josh Thomas

## Abstract

*Disagreements among people are a natural part of the human experience. But when we lose sight of what we are arguing for or who we are arguing with, disagreements can have larger, longer-lasting effects. Media, leadership, and bias all influence our perception of issues and those who disagree with us, a concern which can lead to critical rifts in society, as well as emotional and physical effects on our individual health. A focus on character virtues will help us mend the crisis and keep us—as a society and as individuals—healthy despite our differences.*

## Diagnosing a Crisis

It was a day that probably started out like many before, with plans to socialize around a favored pastime of college football. Fans would cheer for their favorite team, share some food and drink, maybe engage in some light-hearted trash-talking with opposing fans. On this particular day, a group had gathered to watch Southeastern Conference rivals Alabama and Texas



*Diagnosing a Crisis*

A&M battle in a game that likely had serious implications for both teams' chances for a championship. As the game reached its closing moments (Alabama's only regular season loss of the 2021 season) two men began arguing over which team was *actually* the better team—regardless of the game's outcome. But the argument intensified, and the owner of the home asked the men to leave. They continued to argue outside, leading to one of them firing a gun. A few hours later a 27-year-old man was dead at the hospital ("Argument"). Several lives were permanently and tragically changed over a simple disagreement about sports.

If situations like this can happen with something as benign as sports, what happens when the disagreements are over much larger and more impactful issues? Contentious elections and politics. Racial tensions. Global pandemics, masks, and vaccines. Every day we hear of a new crisis in the news cycle. Rather than drawing closer together, our society feels like it is drawing more lines of division and seemingly living by the idea that if you aren't with us, you're against us. And with each new event comes more fracture and less healing. We see examples where someone is invalidated or "cancelled"[1] simply because of an opposing view. Some seem to believe that if you think differently then there is no possible way anything good can come from you. The other side = evil. Plain and simple. No shades of gray. Too many times people seem to take the position that they will

change when the other side does. If someone behaved badly towards them or their position, they are justified in reciprocating. It even feels as if people have lost the ability to "hear" the other side's argument, becoming so insulated from alternative views that they are unwilling—or perhaps unable—to listen to someone who doesn't think like them. This is a disheartening thought.


*Unwilling to "hear" the other*

What we see in the media, in political debates, news shows, on social media, and even during school board meetings presents a worrisome trend of division in our culture. People have always disagreed and will continue to do so. Disagreements often appear to be minor, and are even beneficial as they challenge our thinking. Those types of disagreements are not what should be thought of as a crisis. But when disagreements linger and beliefs become more firmly entrenched or influenced by emotion, it breeds anger and more serious divisions form. The world feels as if it is in crisis—a fracture point has been reached.

This is a call for healing. A fractured bone heals with proper treatment. By emphasizing the role character plays in our interactions with other people we can discover hope that our societal fractures will heal as well. We need to reshape how we hold conversations and how we disagree with others. Let's find common ground again. Let's love our neighbor as ourselves, even if we don't like what they say or what they believe. If we understand what caused the break we can consider how healing strategies such as civility, humility, compassion, and integrity bring healing in the midst of our crisis.

## Fracture: How We Reached a Breaking Point

Human bone can fracture when it is subjected to stresses from various forces, and determining an exact cause is not always easy. Fractures occur due to a significant traumatic force or an accumulation of smaller forces over time. Reducing the number or magnitude of potential stressors helps reduce the occurrence of fractures. Metaphorical fractures might be addressed in much the same way. The better we understand the things that create division and influence our thinking, the better equipped we are to discuss possible solutions. Media amplification of extreme views, compounded by our own biases and the lack of good leadership, results in misperceptions and mistrust of the other. This othering of people who hold different views from us feeds our fear and the decline of commitment to good character. Together these stressors on our society have brought us to a critical breaking point.

*Fracture*

*Media Amplification*        A significant contributor to the crisis is the perception (or misperception) of what others think and believe. However, the sound bites, shouting voices, and extreme positions often misrepresent what people actually believe. The really bad, extreme stories get reported because that's what makes news. They are the loudest voices that produce the strongest reaction, which drives ratings and net traffic. And the more we see these examples the more we normalize them and assume that's how everything (or everyone) is.

Research conducted by the nonpartisan organization, More In Common, highlights this concern. The researchers surveyed 2,100 American adults and identified what they termed the "perception gap," or the difference between reality and what people suspect of others. Participants were asked if they agreed or disagreed with statements on various issues, then asked to estimate the percentage of their political opponents who agreed or disagreed with similar statements. The results showed that people were likely to strongly overestimate the extreme positions of the other side. 55% was the estimated proportion of Democrats and Republicans thought to hold extreme views on various issues; the number who actually held extreme views was 30%. In specific examples, Republicans estimated 52% of Democrats agree that "most police are bad people" when the actual number

was only 15%. Democrats estimated 49% of Republicans deny "racism exists" compared to the actual number of 21% (Yudkin et al.). It seems clear that what people "think" they know may not actually be accurate.

Past events are not protected from division either. In a post-9/11 poll by the Washington Post and ABC News in 2002, many people (55%) viewed the attacks as something that brought the country together for common purpose and made us better (Clement). But leading up to the 20th anniversary of the attacks, another Post-ABC poll found that 46% of people felt the attacks changed the country for the worse. Paul Cantor, English professor at the University of Virginia, argues that the view of America as a happy society full of consensus is rooted more in idealism than realism. He believes that the country has always had a sense of discord and it was this realization that guided the founding fathers to emphasize a system of checks and balances so that no one group could have too much control. Cantor believes that, due to problems like news media fighting for audience, media outlets began presenting everything as a crisis. "The human ability to mobilize around a crisis is diminished when everything is a crisis" (Fisher). This highlights another of the challenges we face: there is a clash between a nostalgia for a romanticized past and a progress-at-all-costs mentality, with many caught in the middle.

*The view of America as a happy society full of consensus is rooted more in idealism than realism.*

While the media overreacts and fuels the public's perception gaps, it turns out we may have more in common than we realize. A good majority of people fall into what Hidden Tribes refers to as the "Exhausted Majority." People in this group still hold very differing views on some specific topics, but they also share similar views on some key issues. The Hidden Tribes report noted four key ways this Exhausted Majority was united:

1. Fed up with polarization

2. Forgotten in public discourse because they are quieter voices

3. Flexible in their views based on the situation rather than holding rigidly to a set of beliefs

4. Belief that we can find common ground.

According to a 2018 Hidden Tribes survey of over 8,000 Americans, over 3 in 4 believed that the differences aren't so great that people can't work

together ("Hidden Tribes"). Perhaps we just need to step back and change our perspective.

*Biases*        Misperceptions of others also arise because we filter information through our conscious and subconscious biases. Why does it seem like so many disagreements have only two clearly defined sides? This is known as binary bias. When an argument is characterized as having only two sides it is easier to oversimplify to support one position and dismiss the other (Grant, ch.8). It is difficult to find common ground if the only choices are "abolish the Electoral College" or "the system is fine exactly how it is." Recognizing there may be nuance to a particular debate brings opportunity for further discussion, even if it ends with "agree to disagree." A different type of bias, confirmation bias, is revealed when someone is more likely to lend credibility to evidence that supports their position while dismissing evidence that opposes it. A related idea is desirability bias, where someone is biased toward believing something they want to be true. This may cause people to view information as fact if they desire it to be true and unwilling to consider that it may actually be false (Grant, ch.8). As an example, if someone is accused of domestic violence, how likely are you to believe their guilt if they happen to be an athlete on your favorite team? What about if they are on a rival one?

*"Disagreement is unavoidable. But division is always a choice."*
*—Andy Stanley*

*Lack of Leadership*        A lack of leadership, mixed with a loss of trust in authority, also can be a source of division. When those in leadership or positions of power and influence use inflammatory rhetoric or promote "us vs them" mentality, their supporters follow suit.[2] Connect this with a general human nature to rebel against authority,[3] and trust in our leaders and our institutions erodes (especially if they hold a position we disagree with). Universities, government offices, religious institutions, science—these are all things that we as a society used to have at least some implicit trust in. Pastor Andy Stanley addressed this in a speech to Georgia state legislators. "Disagreement is unavoidable. But division is always a choice," he said. ". . . Unfortunately, in your world, there are advantages to division. You can raise more money when things are divided. . . . [But] if you need an enemy in order to lead, you're a poor leader" (Foust).

The Christian Church provides other examples of how things have changed. We find Christians who are shouting, making demands, and equating any

form of disagreement as being persecuted for their faith—a faith that then must be vigorously defended. Yet one of the core messages found in both the Old and New Testament is to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind and to love your neighbor as yourself (Deut. 6.5; Lev. 19.18; Matt. 22.35-40). The early Church opposed Roman authority by loving and serving those who persecuted them.

Christians are even turning against their leadership, and on each other. In a powerful article in *The Atlantic,* Peter Wehner opens with a story of an elder election within a church that failed due to a disinformation campaign. This campaign spread a claim that the new elders were going to sell the church building to Muslims. No such thing was going to happen, but people were willing to believe it. Wehner states the Church is facing a crisis as members find a stronger identity in their own convictions or politics than the Church's core message. Rather than their personal convictions being shaped by Biblical teaching, they shape Biblical teaching to their convictions. The common purpose of following the teachings of Jesus and sharing them with others is being fractured by disagreements over racial injustice, poverty, vaccine and mask mandates, and more. Yet despite its fractured state, Wehner allows that he still sees hope in Jesus and the Church.

This example also highlights the negative potential of group identity. What group we are a part of and who we surround ourselves with often affects how we view those in other groups. This may contribute to a negative perception of them, especially among more extreme groups.

*Fear*         It should also be understood that the fear of things, especially the unknown or misunderstood, influences division. When we are fearful of things we have an internal desire to defend and protect ourselves and others. That protective mechanism may explain why we have strong reactions to things that seem to be mild on the surface, such as something on the news or posted on social media. Fear can be beneficial when it keeps us from dangerous situations but it causes harmful rifts when we fear people because they have different views or are different from us. Fear can make us angry, and anger can lead us to hate things we don't understand. And it's easy to see that many people are suffering due to hate.[4] When our fear overtakes us to the point that we get angry at others,

> *What group we are part of and who we surround ourselves with often affects how we view those in other groups.*

and that anger turns to hate, fractures begin to form. Unfortunately, the unscrupulous can manipulate our fears and use them as an advantage to gain power, followers, or ratings—all it takes is stating we should be afraid of something and then providing the "solution" to remaining safe.

Why does it matter that simple disagreements can blow up into bigger things? Isn't it important to be passionate, and stand up for what you believe? Of course. But there is also a concern about getting so worked up over issues, sometimes to the point of a physical response. A fractured bone affects the function of the rest of the body. Our cultural fractures can affect the health of our communities, but also of one's individual body. A research study on media coverage of the Boston Marathon bombings found people exposed to repeated media coverage of the events indicated higher acute stress than people who were actually at or near the bombing sites themselves (Holman et al.).

As early as the 1920s, Walter Cannon was credited with identifying the acute stress response. He named it the "fight-or-flight response" and it explains how our body responds to perceived harmful circumstances. When dealing with a perceived threat, the body undergoes a number of physiological changes to deal with the situation. Heart rate increases, airways and blood vessels expand, metabolism increases to deliver fuel to active muscles. These responses prepare the body to perform the necessary actions for either choice: fight the threat or escape the threat (flight). In addition to the physiological responses, there are obvious psychological influences to this response as well ("Stress"). How we perceive our circumstances likely determines whether we see them as potentially harmful or not.

*Acute stress response*

We might understand the fight-or-flight response if a T-Rex is eyeing us as a snack, but would it really be a factor in a disagreement? Actually, yes. Pastor and counselor Beth McCaw describes crisis as a time when real or perceived stressors overcome our real or perceived ability to deal with our demands. McCaw observes people as having stressors or demands that must be dealt with and having resources and coping strategies to do that. Crises arise when the demands outweigh the resources to handle them. The crisis response may be cognitive or visceral.

Cannon's fight-or-flight response can also be connected to another scientific theory discovered around a similar time period, Hans Selye's General

Adaptation Syndrome ("General Adaptation Syndrome"). This theory identifies a three-stage process that describes how the body responds to stress in both acute (short-term) and chronic (long-term) circumstances. The stages are (1) alarm reaction, when the fight-or-flight response occurs; (2) resistance, as the body adapts to the stress; and (3) exhaustion, when the body's ability to adapt to or resist the stress is compromised. Stages 1 and 3 in particular are significant in our crisis of disagreement.

When a person perceives disagreement as a threat (the alarm stage) and the fight-or-flight response is engaged, one of the serious concerns is the possibility of escalation. While hopefully rare, we have seen instances (as previously mentioned) where death has resulted. But even short of death, how much violence has been born of disagreement?

*Chronic stress has been linked to increased risk of physical disease and a negative influence on brain health.*

A concern with the exhaustion stage is the long-term effect it has on our health. It is well documented how chronic stress has been linked to increased risk of physical disease and a negative influence on brain health ("Protect Your Brain"; Bernstein; Yaribeygi et al.; McEwen). If we are in a constant state of disagreement, leading to chronic stress, there is potential for significant harm to our wellbeing in the form of anxiety, effects on brain health, and other health concerns. People are fighting over mask mandates, or the lack thereof. Others are fighting about how Democrats are destroying the country. Or is it Republicans? It can be exhausting.[5]

*Decline in Character Commitments*       An unfortunate observation in these societal fractures is a decline in people's commitment to character. In many charged issues one can observe a lack of civility, humility, compassion, and other virtues as people on all sides of a debate lay claim to the moral high ground. But is a lack of character a cause of our division, or a result of it? It may be that it is both.

Perhaps ironically, people are even divided over what displays good character. Consider the example of Ellen DeGeneres and George W. Bush. A photo of the two of them together at a Monday Night Football game in 2019 set off a storm on social media, with many upset with DeGeneres due to the strong political differences between the two of them. Ellen defended herself to critics, saying that she felt it was important that people not have to agree on everything to be friends, and that she could be nice to someone

who held such different beliefs. In a CNN article Chris Cillizza applauded Ellen's notion that she could still be friendly towards a person even if she strongly disagreed with their political stance, contrasting her behavior with liberals and conservatives who take advantage of division to rally support. "There's no question that exploiting divisions can be good for promoting your own politics," writes Cillizza. "But it is a terrible way to go about trying to fix what's broken in our politics and our culture" (Cillizza). Mehdi Hasan from *The Intercept* holds an opposing view from Cillizza, arguing that Bush's alleged war crimes when he was President and negative behaviors as governor of Texas disqualified him from any kindness (Hasan). Many of the responses to DeGeneres echoed these two trends, with some viewing her as showing good character and others viewing her as lacking character.

A troubling aspect of our misperceptions and the influence on disagreement is the tendency to silence the disagreement, the person who says or does something we don't like. Research among Gen Z, Millennials, and the over-40 population in the United

*Breaking down our division may require honest self-reflection.*

Kingdom highlighted how disagreements can even exist about how one might respond to someone who holds different views ("Democratic Repair"). The survey asked whether it was more important to protect free speech or to stop offensive speech. Gen Z responders were evenly divided, Millennials favored free speech (43% to 23%) and the over-40 group favored it even more (60% to 17%). The report also noted that Millennials were the least likely of any age group to express support for the rights of people with extreme views to express those views. This illustrates how changing views among different generations can contribute to our division. Some feel strongly that certain types of speech should have consequences. Others view this as infringing on their right to free speech and equate it to censorship. This is more challenging when there is not consensus on where we draw the line between speaking one's mind and when it becomes offensive. Our own experiences can affect us as well. I think of my own children, hearing them fighting as one yells "He said ---- about me!" Meanwhile I'm sitting right there and heard nothing of the sort. But the intent of the words was interpreted differently by my child. As a society we tend to "fill in the blanks" ourselves around the words that we heard.

Clearly people interpret words differently. To some the meaning of the First Amendment is that they (or someone they agree with) are allowed to say anything they want, no matter how harmful or inaccurate, without

repercussion. Many would agree there are certain types of speech that should not be accepted or encouraged in our society, and people are right to speak out against it. At the same time, care should be taken to not swing too far in the other direction. Shouting down opposition for simply being on the other side (e.g. the perceived "wrong side") of an argument does little to bring understanding and resolution. It mostly creates more division. It runs the risk of misunderstanding the opposition in the clamor to get what we want. There has been a shift from "I don't have to be friends with them" to "I don't have to be nice to them" and this lack of civility comes out in our interactions with and attitudes towards others.

This is not to say that people should not engage in issues or fight for change, but to consider how to do it in a healthy way for everyone. Perhaps you don't think that you can be friends with someone who disagrees with you, but you can still demonstrate civility. Our decline in civility makes it very difficult to demonstrate compassion towards others, and without compassion it is hard to heal together.

## Healing: Responding with Character

If we are going to work together and find common ground again, I believe that good character is vital to the process. Let us act in good faith towards our neighbors and be aware when our or their ideals affect how we act towards people. Amid discord, we can demonstrate compassion and empathy. If change is going to happen, it may be necessary to extend an olive branch and not worry about our group identity or others who share it. If we wait for "the other side" to do something first,

*Healing*

we may not see change. To quote Henry Cloud, "The truth is it is difficult to trust someone based on the demand for mutual performance" (83).

Breaking down our division may require honest self-reflection, or at least admitting we don't know everything. The ability to think critically about our closely held beliefs is a hard thing for us to do but can go a long way towards helping fix things. Be able to identify when your position (or someone you agree with) might be wrong. Recognize potential limitations or flaws of arguments. This may help us to be more open-minded and willing to listen

to those on the other side. As Pastor Andy Stanley described it, the "messy middle" is where problems get solved (Foust).

There are specific steps that can be taken to start. Be challenged to try them out and see what results.[6]

1. *Realize that the loudest (and perhaps most frustrating) people or views may not represent the majority.* Look for the exhausted majority, the ones who want to see positive changes but aren't shouting about it. It is probably not realistic to think we can find a solution to every divisive issue that will satisfy all people. To do that would require a sacrifice or concession on some things, and some people seem unwilling to give an inch. Be aware of the impact that the media has on this and be intentional about countering it.

2. *Take care in how you use social media.* While I can appreciate those who have completely eschewed the use of social media, for many it is a significant connection to information, and to friends and family. Nevertheless, we need to be aware that what we are seeing can be flawed and possibly biased information (regardless of which side it is coming from). That article you read from a post on Facebook (assuming the original poster read more than the headline) might be designed to draw a reaction so that it gets shared more, driving ratings and clicks.

3. *Think like a scientist*. In his book, *Think Again*, organizational psychologist Adam Grant describes four mindsets we often have when engaging in discussions. The preacher mindset focuses on promoting and protecting our ideals. The prosecutor identifies flaws in the opposing argument and pushes for victory. A politician mindset wants to campaign, win an audience, and keep "constituents" happy. Acknowledging that there is a place for these three in different scenarios, Grant also cautions that it can lead to a reluctance to change our views. Grant argues in favor of the scientist mindset, being willing to look at new and different information to see where we might be wrong and to learn new things (Grant 18–19). Being aware of our potential biases is important in being able to do this in a meaningful way. This also demonstrates humility in a willingness to admit we don't know everything and can learn from others.

4. *Distinguish blame from contribution.* Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen of the Harvard Negotiation Project argue in their book *Difficult Conversations* that blaming someone creates a judgment about

a person in a situation, while discussing what or who has contributed to a situation moves toward understanding (ch.4). It may be a subtle distinction but it has impact. Which is more likely to lead to a solution, judging someone or understanding them?

5. *Engage in active, authentic listening.* Stone, Patton, and Heen list three purposes of difficult conversations: to learn the other's story, to express your own views and feelings, and to problem solve together. Active listening is a set of skills involving inquiry, paraphrasing, and acknowledgement that can be practiced to aid these purposes. Don't listen to respond, listen to understand. Take time to hear their points and rephrase them back to the person to confirm you heard their view correctly. Don't judge or argue, but understand where they are coming from and try and learn what experiences may have brought them to this viewpoint. Once you can see that you can understand them (whether you agree or not), you can respond. It is also important to do this authentically rather than just rigidly follow stated guidelines. Active, authentic listening is an important step in being civil, which is, in turn, an essential part of having meaningful conversations with those we disagree with.

6. *Value a person more than a position.* Just like the stereotypical family that has the one crazy uncle (why is it always an uncle?), we can see the value of people and relationships despite differences on the issues. Being nice or civil to someone does not mean that we agree with or accept everything they do or say, but it will help us to treat others with compassion. Consider a viral photo taken during an Iowa High School football game between Charles City and New Hampton. The photo shows Charles City player Mario Hoefer stretching out a cramp for a player on the opposing team. In an article on Today.com, Hoefer explained that he saw the New Hampton player go down and grab his calf after a play. Having dealt with cramping himself, Hoefer observed that no one had yet noticed the player and come to help. So he stopped and helped the player stretch out the cramp until the athletic trainers got there. Hoefer stated that he just wanted to help and would do it over and over again. "We've played each other for years now. It was more like a



*Mario Hoefer and Carter Steinlage*

brotherly thing to help him out" (Hanson). Seeing through the competition to the value in the person makes room for compassion.

7. *Build strong communities by caring for others.* This is something that is vital and in real danger of being lost. Valuing our community and those in it is a contrast to viewing people as "the other." If people continue to choose division it risks creating permanent fractures in our communities, and if that happens something of real value will be gone. Don't overlook starting small. Individual efforts in our communities have the potential for larger ripple effects. It may not change everything, but it will certainly have a positive impact on the places where we work, play, and live. Anthropologist Margaret Mead identified the earliest sign of civilization not as clay pots, iron, tools, or agriculture. Instead her evidence was a healed femur bone. Mead said that competitive, savage societies showed clues of violence and lack of pity. Skulls were crushed, pierced by arrows, and more. But a healed femur indicated that someone cared for the injured, hunting for them, bringing food, nursing them back to health at their own personal expense (Brand and Yancey 68). I would rather live in a community that is healed, not broken.

## Concluding Thoughts

Society is fractured, stressed by misinformation, media amplification, failures in leadership, and our own fears and biases. By recommitting to virtues of character like civility, compassion, and humility, we can start to make positive changes to overcome these fractures.

We are not all the same. We have different beliefs, different cultures, different experiences. We all want to live a good life, and the attempt to do so will sometimes come into conflict. What I hope we desire is that our conflicts create circumstances of healing instead of fractures. Rather than letting our differences create discord and develop into larger issues, let us lead with character. Let us overcome fears and misperceptions and display grace and compassion. Let's have conversations and look for common ground. Applied properly, stressors on human bone will make it stronger. Let's hope we as people can do the same for our society.

*Josh Thomas is a professor of Exercise Science in the Department of Health, Wellness, and Sport at the University of Dubuque.  He earned a B.S. in Exercise Science from Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa, and a M.S. in Exercise and*

*Sport Science and a PhD in Kinesiology from Iowa State University. He enjoys being a husband to Jeanne, dad to four kids, and teaching students about all the amazing things the human body can do.*

---

Image credit p. 12: "patient" by mohamed_hassan, www.pixabay.com
Photo credit p. 13: photo by Liza Summer, www.pexels.com
Image credit p. 14: "back pain" by mohamed_hassan, www.pixabay.com
Photo credit p. 18: "cat" by Fang_Y_M, www.pixabay.com
Image credit p. 21: "x-ray" by mohamed_hassan, www.pixabay.com
Photo credit p. 23: photo by Wendy Hegtvedt Luft; used with permission

## Notes

[1] The phenomenon of "cancel culture" has roots in social media and typically involves the attempt to silence a person, business, organization, etc., that says or does something deemed to be offensive to someone else. This may translate into not buying products, not listening to them, or generally blacklisting them permanently.

[2] Self-check: Did you immediately picture a specific example? Why? Is that fair?

[3] Paul Cantor notes that pop culture is fascinated with this, promoting anti-establishment, rogue characters or groups who take down the "Big" target elites or experts (Fisher). It is one of the reasons that some are so quick to accept conspiracy theories.

[4] It's okay if you heard that in Yoda's voice.

[5] Let's not get into gif or gif or 1 vs 2 spaces after a period.

[6] Pastor Robert M. Franklin, Theology professor at Emory University, shared his own suggestions for fixing our divide. Read them and consider his wisdom.
   1. Reset the national tone.
   2. Restore respect for facts, evidence, and science.
   3. Affirm leaders who are courageous, competent, and demonstrate integrity.
   4. Restrain from taking cynical cheap shots at those who are honestly trying to improve our society.
   5. Begin every difficult conversation with humility and humor.
   6. Be generous to strangers.
   7. Educate yourself about the experience of others who are different.

## Works Cited

"Argument over Alabama's College Football Loss to Texas A&M Led to Fatal Shooting, Police Say." *ESPN.Com*, 11 Oct. 2021, https://www.espn.com/college-

football/story/_/id/32381239/argument-alabama-college-football-loss-texas-led-fatal-shooting-police-say.

Bernstein, Rebecca. "The Mind and Mental Health: How Stress Affects the Brain." *Touro University WorldWide*, 26 July 2016, https://www.tuw.edu/health/how-stress-affects-the-brain/.

Brand, Paul, and Philip Yancey. *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*. Zondervan, 1997.

Cillizza, Chris. "What the Friendship of Ellen DeGeneres and George W. Bush Should Teach Us." *CNN*, 8 Oct. 2019, https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/08/politics/ellen-degeneres-george-w-bush/index.html.

Clement, Scott. "More Americans Say 9/11 Changed U.S. for Worse than Better, Post-ABC Poll Finds." *Washington Post*, 8 Sept. 2021. *www.washingtonpost.com*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/09/08/more-americans-say-911-changed-us-worse-than-better-post-abc-poll-finds/.

Cloud, Henry. *Integrity: The Courage to Meet the Demands of Reality*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2006.

"Democratic Repair." *More in Common*, 3 Dec. 2021, https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/our-work/research/democratic-repair/.

Fisher, Marc. "After Pearl Harbor and 9/11, Americans Came Together. Have We Lost That Capacity?" *Washington Post*, 27 Sept. 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/after-pearl-harbor-and-911-americans-came-together-have-we-lost-that-capacity/2021/09/26/1246b22e-1492-11ec-9589-31ac3173c2e5_story.html.

Foust, Michael. "Andy Stanley Scolds Ga. Legislators Who Stoke Division: 'You Are Terrible Leaders.'" *ChristianHeadlines.Com*, 16 Mar. 2022, https://www.christianheadlines.com/contributors/michael-foust/andy-stanley-scolds-ga-legislators-who-stoke-division-you-are-terrible-leaders.html.

Franklin, Robert M. "I've Lived in Both Americas. Most People Everywhere Don't Want to Hate Each Other." *CNN*, 20 Jan. 2021, https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/20/opinions/remedies-for-civic-life-after-america-division-franklin/index.html.

"General Adaptation Syndrome." *Psychologist World*, https://www.psychologistworld.com/stress/general-adaptation-syndrome. Accessed 12 Oct. 2021.

Grant, Adam. *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know*. Viking, 2021.

Hanson, Kait. "Photo of High School Football Player Helping Opponent Goes Viral." *Today*, 21 Sept. 2021, https://www.today.com/parents/iowa-high-school-football-player-s-sportsmanship-goes-viral-t231824.

Hasan, Mehdi. "Dear Ellen: The Problem with George W. Bush Is Not His Beliefs—It's His War Crimes." *The Intercept*, 9 Oct. 2019, https://theintercept.com/2019/10/09/ellen-degeneres-george-bush/.

"The Hidden Tribes of America." *Hidden Tribes*, https://hiddentribes.us/. Accessed 31 Mar. 2022.

Holman, E. Alison, et al. "Media's Role in Broadcasting Acute Stress Following the Boston Marathon Bombings." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 111, no. 1, Jan. 2014, pp. 93–98, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1316265110.

McCaw, Beth. *Crisis*. Wendt Research Team Meeting, 16 Sept. 2021, University of Dubuque.

McEwen, Bruce S. "Neurobiological and Systemic Effects of Chronic Stress." *Chronic Stress (Thousand Oaks)*, vol. 1, Apr. 2017, p. 2470547017692328. *PubMed Central*, https://doi.org/10.1177/2470547017692328.

"Protect Your Brain from Stress." *Harvard Health*, 15 Feb. 2021, https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/protect-your-brain-from-stress.

Stone, Douglas, et al. *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*. 1st edition, Penguin Books, 2000.

"Stress: Fight or Flight Response." *Psychologist World*, https://www.psychologistworld.com/stress/fight-or-flight-response. Accessed 31 Mar. 2022.

Wehner, Peter. "The Evangelical Church Is Breaking Apart." *The Atlantic*, 24 Oct. 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/10/evangelical-trump-christians-politics/620469/.

Yaribeygi, Habib, et al. "The Impact of Stress on Body Function: A Review." *EXCLI Journal*, vol. 16, July 2017, pp. 1057–72. *PubMed Central*, https://doi.org/10.17179/excli2017-480.

Yudkin, Daniel, et al. *The Perception Gap: How False Impressions Are Pulling Americans Apart*. More in Common, June 2019.

# Science and Integrity:
# A Pandemic Lens

Ken Turner

## Abstract

*The COVID-19 Pandemic is a crisis that provides a lens into the integration of science and integrity. Several important questions that arose during the pandemic are utilized to follow the release of science-based answers to those questions. Examination of those questions, their answers, and their timing help to provide the answer to the question, "Was there integrity?" In the end, science practiced with integrity can illuminate a pathway through the crisis.*

Frank has just told his wife that he is being required to get another booster of the vaccine to keep his job. He's not happy about it. He speaks his mind about the overreach of the company. "It's all a plot to plant nanobots in my blood. I have rights over my own body, and no one should be required to choose between a paycheck and civil liberties. The scientists come on TV wearing their stupid facemasks and tell everyone what they should do, when they should do it, and how much safer we will all be. These scientists change their mind every other week. First the pandemic is over, then a new variant is surging. First masks are unnecessary, then masks are required and the economy tanks. I bet the scientists had money in mask stock!"



*COVID-19 vaccine*

Across town, Kim has just told her husband that masks will not be required at work, and "there is no way of knowing if the people in my office or building are up to date on their vaccines. It's that governor! He just decides he knows more than the scientists and makes it illegal to have a mask mandate or a vaccine requirement. The governor

says he is sure the people in the state will make the right choice—that he thinks masks are no longer required when the vaccine and the latest booster has been available. He just wants to make points with the conservative citizens by upholding civil rights. If that's the governor's real motivation, I'd like to ask him how his civil rights argument stacks up against public health. You know how the cases of COVID-19 are headed in the wrong direction again. Has he read how few ICU beds are open in our state? I wonder what corporations have paid to get this governor elected!"

Integrity, science, crisis: these words carry different meanings to different people when applied to the COVID-19 pandemic. I write this near the end of 2021. Almost 5 million people have died worldwide ("WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard"). I offer a treatise at this point in the pandemic crisis with knowledge that science and integrity are assets always worthy of study.

My perspective is that of a scientist/ educator. I have taught science classes for more than 40 years, from middle school through college. For the past nine years, I have taught at University of Dubuque, mainly in the Chemistry department. I am not an epidemiologist or a human disease specialist. I am a citizen with an
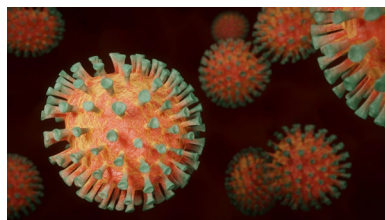


*COVID-19 virus*

advanced degree in Educational Leadership who researches and strives for best practices in science education (Turner et al., "ILED"; Turner and Hoffman; Turner et al., "Engineering Design"). I am an educator and I continue to learn. I hope we can learn from our experiences with COVID-19. Science practiced with integrity on the part of scientists and scientific institutions can illuminate a pathway through the crisis of COVID. To unpack this perspective, I'll look at what constitutes a crisis, how science works, and illustrate it in the chronology of a few pieces of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## The COVID Crisis

In early 2020, many adults did their jobs at home or lost their jobs (or their businesses), parents were told to become teachers, children were expected to be much more independent learners, and families often became isolated from friends and other family members. According to Beth McCaw, a professor of ministry at the University of Dubuque, a personal crisis develops when the experience of real or perceived demands (stressors) exceeds the real or perceived capacities (resources) to cope with those stressors

(McCaw; Stone; "Stress in America 2020"). A crisis confronts us singly (or across an entire world's population) and demands that an action be taken. While not everyone suffered the same consequences as the year unfolded, many people had the perception of a great increase in their stressors— with little or no increase in their resources. Individually, most people were experiencing a crisis. These many individual crises were bringing about a crisis at the institutional, statewide, and governmental levels.

As the new disease was transmitted across the world (almost 250 million cases as of October 31, 2021, according to the World Health Organization, or WHO) ("WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard"), many hospitals became so overburdened that they were curtailing elective procedures and turning hallways and parking lots into areas to treat COVID-19. Certainly, most healthcare facilities were experiencing a gap between the needs of the patients and the resources the facility had for their treatment. Those facilities were experiencing a crisis. Cities and states were similarly impacted by the rising tide of needs of their citizens and the lack of resources to address those needs. Individually, institutionally, and governmentally, we were experiencing a crisis.

People looked for answers from science, but as astrophysicist Carl Sagan wrote, "We live in a society absolutely dependent on science and technology and yet have cleverly arranged things so that almost no one understands science and technology. That's a clear prescription for disaster" (Sagan and Kalosh). If we are to understand any perspective from science on the crisis, it is important to know how science works.

## How Science Works

Scientists uncover information about the world around us through observation. In those observations they may measure with analytical tools, attempting to peer at a black hole light years away or determine the pull of a single Fluorine atom on an electron of Carbon. Sophisticated instruments have been developed so that scientists can measure these things, but in the end, it is still an observation. These observations are recorded, then analyzed, then evaluated and eventually published.



*Scientific observation*

Did I say published? In practice, getting published is not guaranteed. First, scientists must submit their findings to a publication where the manuscript will undergo peer-review. The peer-review process is the cornerstone of quality science publications, according to Dana Barr, editor of the *Journal of Exposure Science and Environmental Epidemiology*. Typically, three anonymous reviewers with expertise related to the topic of the paper will read and suggest revisions to the paper if needed. Or they could determine that the paper does not demonstrate the rigorous testing and validity required for publication, in which case they recommend that the manuscript be declined for publication. If published, additional interested scientists around the world can attempt to replicate the original findings and push the boundaries of the research a little farther, using their unique gifts of intuition and creativity. The new findings, if worthy, will also be published through the peer-review process.

*The peer-review process is an important gateway for truth-telling.*

The peer-review process is an important gateway for truth-telling. It represents a way for the scientific community to agree or disagree without attempting to shout the other side down (Thomas). The integrity of a scientist, as well as whatever institution they represent, is on the line in the peer-review process. Anyone can make a claim on TV (within the limits established by the FCC and the FDA). But a scientist must prove their claims with data and before their peers. Thus, the peer-review process is a key standard to preserve the integrity of whatever is published.

Scientists in industry, government, and academia construct experiments to try to learn a little more about the world around us by taking small and time-consuming steps. A single experiment proves almost nothing. It is the repetition of many, many experiments, summarized by overarching trends, that eventually "prove" a particular item. But even then, the door is always open to some new experiment that demonstrates the contrary. Dalton's Atomic Theory was built on the shoulders of many researchers and their conclusions.[1] Part of that theory held that atoms were indivisible. For almost 100 years, scientists thought that atoms were the smallest particle of matter. But in 1897, J. J. Thompson published the results of his work with evacuated tubes and electrical discharges and showed there were particles smaller than the atom and a part of every atom—electrons! Dalton's Atomic Theory was amended to incorporate this new information, and scientists improved our understanding of matter based on these experiments.

Science is like cutting a trail through a tangle of unknowns. Imagine this kind of time-consuming, incremental process being used to find the answers to a novel virus beginning to spread across the world. In early 2020 we wanted scientific answers to the virus in the immediate moment of the unfolding pandemic crisis, but science does not work that way.

Scientific integrity means telling the truth with transparency when reporting scientific phenomena or research (Barr). Philosopher Cheshire Calhoun indicates that attributes of integrity include having proper regard for one's role in a community process and having proper respect for the judgment of others. In this case, a scientist must have proper regard for truth-telling while reporting their work and respect for the judgment of other scientists.

The integrity of any individual scientist can affect the public perception of all scientists; it can affect the public perception of science itself. And the integrity of any scientific institution has an even more important effect on society's perception. For these reasons, Ralph Cicerone, then the president of the National Academy of Sciences, stated that ". . . the perceived misbehavior of even a few scientists can diminish the credibility of science as a whole." Scientists and the scientific community need to protect scientific integrity with zeal.

Barr states, "Scientific Integrity means fully disclosing all potential areas of bias, curtailing blatant scientific misconduct, and . . . to ensure quality science is published in our journals" (17). Her argument is that without full disclosure and transparency, we cannot ensure scientific integrity within the article.

*Scientific integrity means telling the truth with transparency when reporting scientific phenomena or research.*

According to the Committee on Science, Engineering, Public Policy of the National Academy of Science, the National Academy of Engineering, and the Institute of Medicine, research data, methods, and other information integral to publicly reported results should be publicly available (Cicerone). This has become a standard for all peer-reviewed journals. Without the public availability of results, the integrity of the article can be questioned. Indeed, public health physician Natasha Bagdasarian and colleagues made the case in 2020 that rapid publication of COVID-19 studies and opinions through preprints runs the risk of allowing improperly vetted articles to influence public health policy decisions.[2] It is

important to ensure that the scientific community maintain the public's trust in it.

If a scientific institution does not maintain its transparency and trust with the public and with its own employees, its integrity is compromised and a toxic culture may threaten the institution from within. Lack of trust, respect, and transparency will result in this toxic culture (Grace).

When a scientist or group of scientists are people of moral character who publish the results of their research with integrity, that science can help us find a pathway from pre-pandemic to post-pandemic. Science with integrity can help us to move from a time when the disease was affecting nearly every aspect of our lives to a "new normal".

## The Role of Science with Integrity in the COVID Crisis

As the pandemic crisis unfolded across the world, people (and governments) looked to scientists for answers and a path to the "new normal". However, science builds knowledge a piece at a time, slowly. There are rarely absolutes, and the answers require study and more study and comprehensive analysis to make sense of data. To understand how science works in the time of the pandemic, let's consider a few of the important questions we were asking about the disease, and the timeline of information released. I have used some information released by the World Health Organization (WHO); it is made up of more than 8,000 public health experts, doctors, epidemiologists, scientists, and managers. WHO had personnel doing research, summarizing research, and reporting research as the pandemic unfolded across the globe.

*1. Is there human-to-human transmission?*

On January 14, 2020, a WHO press briefing stated that, based on experience with respiratory pathogens, the potential for human-to-human transmission existed. "It is certainly *possible* that there is limited human-to-human transmission" (italics added). But on the same day WHO also tweeted that "*preliminary evidence* by Chinese authorities had found 'no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission'" (italics added). Then, by January 30, WHO advised the Director-General that "four countries had evidence (8 cases) of human-to-human transmission" ("Listings").

As pertains to human-to-human transmission, barely more than 14 days after becoming aware of a cluster of "pneumonia of unknown cause" in

Wuhan, WHO scientists stated that human-to-human transmission *was possible*, but quoted Chinese sources who found no clear *preliminary evidence* of that occurring (italics added). However, by January 30, 2020, WHO stated that there had already been eight cases in four countries that demonstrated person-to-person transmission. We (the public) want to have our questions answered immediately with no uncertainties. But early in the pre-pandemic, some of those answers were not yet known—or at least not before the end of January ("Listings").

*Transparency is an important part of truth-telling.*

*Was There Integrity?* It may be confusing as to why a group of scientists can state at one time that person-to-person transmission is unlikely, and later insist that eight cases were known to have occurred. But that is what happens as more information is obtained. WHO did present the information, with appropriate caveats (see italicized words in statements above), and the source for their statements. As more information was obtained, WHO made changes to their messaging. That transparency is an important part of truth-telling.

*2. Can the disease be spread by asymptomatic people?*

On February 4, 2020, during the meeting of the WHO executive board, in responding to a question, the WHO Secretariat said, "It is possible that there may be individuals who are asymptomatic that shed virus, but *we need more detailed studies around this* to determine how often that is happening and if this is leading to secondary transmission" ("Listings") (italics added). It seems the question persisted, because on June 10, CNBC reported that Dr. Maria Van Kerkhove, head of WHO's emerging disease and zoonosis unit said "From the data we have, it still *seems* to be rare that an asymptomatic person actually transmits onward to secondary individuals" ("Listings") (italics added). The use of "seems" attests to the lack of a definitive study on the subject. But a scientific study published through JAMA Network Open a few months later on January 7, 2021, found that the proportion of transmission from individuals who did not have COVID-19 symptoms was estimated at greater than half of all transmission (Johansson).

*Was There Integrity?* Again, it may be confusing that scientists would say that asymptomatic transmission *seems* to be rare, only to conclude in later months that asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic transmission may be responsible for more than half the cases. But again, the spokesperson had responded based on the current information, with the added caveat that it

"seems" to be rare. As more information about transmission became known, the scientists changed their messaging. It was prudent, important, and showed integrity to change the message based on the most recent studies.

*3. Should asymptomatic people wear masks?*

A publication released by WHO in January 2020 stated that, for individuals without respiratory symptoms, a medical mask is not required *as no evidence is available* on its usefulness to protect non-sick persons ("Listings") (italics added). However, masks might be worn in some countries according to local cultural habits. But by December 2020 WHO guidance was that "Masks should be used as part of a comprehensive strategy of measures to suppress transmission and save lives. Make wearing a mask a normal part of being around other people" ("Coronavirus Disease").

The first directive notes that no evidence was available at the time. However, studies of the effectiveness of wearing masks became more common in the months that followed. By April, 2020, a preprint summary of studies claimed that "Public mask wearing is most effective at stopping spread of the virus when compliance is high. The decreased transmissibility could substantially reduce the death toll and the economic impact while the cost of the intervention is low" (Howard). This summary had not yet undergone peer-review, but it hinted that evidence was accumulating, referencing peer-reviewed studies already being published.

A study published in April 2020 (Leung) found that cloth masks were especially effective for source control of the virus. Turns out we were thinking about the wrong person gaining the protection. Most masks do NOT provide much protection for the wearer, except for those wonderful masks and shields that health care workers use—those masks supply them with



*Mask-wearing*

quite a bit of protection. The rest of us were left with the options of cloth, disposable, double layer, or neck gaiter; our mask protects others nearby from our potentially virus-laden respiratory droplets. A few months later, in July 2020, a summary of publications concluded, "The findings of this systematic review and meta-analysis support the use of face masks in a community setting" (Coclite).

Later, a model published in August 2020 concluded that, "even with a limited protective effect, face masks can reduce total infections and deaths

. . ." (Worby and Chang). A later study concluded, "Therefore, wearing masks in public is essential as its effectiveness has already been established by the current studies" (Wang et al.). Your mask protects me, my mask protects you. So, you see, wearing a mask is a community protection kind of thing. You might have the virus and not know it (asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic), but your mask gives the rest of us some protection from you. Your mask doesn't protect you, it protects us.

*Was There Integrity?* Scientists first reported that masks were not required for asymptomatic people because no studies were available to guide them ("Listings"). But studies were soon provided that linked mask-wearing and disease transmission rates, and scientists changed their evaluation. Did it show a lack of integrity to change a directive? I think it would show a lack of integrity if the directive had not changed. The first WHO directive was based on what was known at the time—even suggesting the need for studies. The new WHO directive, advising mask wearing in any public place, was based on many subsequent peer-reviewed studies.

## 4. Should Hydroxychloroquine Be Taken to Prevent or Cure COVID-19?

On April 11, 2020, then President Trump told reporters at a White House briefing (Yu) that he might take hydroxychloroquine (Weeks later he confirmed that he was taking it (Karni and Thomas).). He also said that people should take it. And in regard to its efficacy, he said, "Maybe it's true, maybe it's not. Why don't you investigate that?" At the same briefing, Dr. Anthony Fauci said, "We don't have any definitive information to be able to make any comment" (Yu). I prefer the scientist's statement of no definitive information over the politician's call to embrace the new treatment while we investigate it.



*Dr. Anthony Fauci*

A study begun on March 23, 2020, on two different doses of chloroquine (a close chemical relative of hydroxychloroquine) on patients hospitalized with severe COVID-19 symptoms was re-structured when 16 of the 41 patients (39%) taking the higher dose had died by the 13th day of the trial (Borba). The study was published on April 24, 2020.

A study published in the New England Journal of Medicine on June 3, 2020 concluded that hydroxychloroquine neither prevented the illness nor worked as a post-exposure prophylaxis (Boulware). Nonetheless, Trump continued

# A Few Events of a Pandemic Year
## (2020 & Jan. 2021)

**Human-to-Human Spread**  **Asymptomatic Spread**  **Mask Wearing**  **Hydroxychloroquine (HQ) Usage**

No clear evidence

8 cases evidence — Mask not required

January

February

May be possible, need more study

HQ study of high and low doses begins

March

HQ study drops high dose due to lethality

April

Trump touts HQ; Fauci argues not enough evidence

Masks slow the spread of disease

May

Still seems rare

June

Results published for HQ study of high/low doses

July

New study shows HQ does not prevent or cure COVID-19

August

Trump claims HQ works and is safe

September

October

November

Many studies confirm the efficacy of mask wearing

December

WHO guidelines: Wear a mask in public places

Accounts for more than 50% of transmission

January

*The events discussed in this article via timeline*

to promote its use in a video he posted on Twitter and in a statement on July 28 he said, "I happen to believe in it. I would take it. As you know, I took it for a 14-day period. And, as you know, I'm here" (Lovelace).

*Was There Integrity?*      There was a lot of interest in hydroxychloroquine in 2020. People across the globe were looking for a silver bullet that might prevent or cure this easily transmittable virus. Some studies (in labware) indicated that high doses of hydroxychloroquine might have antiviral activity. But when administered to humans at that high dosage rate, lethality also increased and studies had to be modified or terminated (Borba). Eventually, based on several studies, hydroxychloroquine as a treatment option was abandoned (Boulware). The scientists studying and reporting their studies on hydroxychloroquine maintained integrity. They published their methods, their data, and their evaluation. Because they maintained their integrity, our medical communities, and society as a whole, understand this aspect of the virus a little better.

Political messaging on the topic of hydroxychloroquine was a bit messier, as persons in authority continued to promote its use—even after it had been shown to be ineffective. Politicians ought to be concerned that our ability to have trust and confidence in their actions is tied to our perceptions of the politician's integrity (Rose and Heywood; Duba). It is also important to realize that leadership in any capacity ought to recognize a responsibility to trust and integrity (Hein).

## Conclusions

Is there a role for science to play in the times of an unfolding crisis? *Yes!* Some would respond to my answer with the question, *but can science be trusted when science can move so agonizingly slow?* I say, *Yes!* Science can seem to move slowly, but that slower pace based on study after study is what ensures truth, accuracy. It is what maintains the integrity of both scientists and the institutions that the scientists represent. The integrity, the truthfulness of science, is born out of incremental approaches from many researchers and the process of peer-review. On that time-tested methodology we can place our trust.

Should we believe in science? It may be splitting grammatical hairs here, but I choose to use the term *believe in* for those things that I cannot prove. I believe in God. I believe that Jesus came to earth as a man, died on a cross, and rose again. You may choose to believe in many gods or no gods.

But I keep science clear of the term *belief*. Science is a record of human observations of the world around them and their attempts to make sense of those observations. That does not require me to believe in science.

Science is a useful and important resource in times of crisis. Science has helped and continues to help us understand the nature of the COVID-19 virus our world is fighting. It has resolved issues of transmittance and unsubstantiated cures, and led to development of several highly effective vaccines.

We may trust science to provide a roadmap through a crisis. It may come slowly, but it does come. The painstakingly slow processes that are inherently part of science are what sustain the integrity of science. Because of those processes, we can trust science to help illuminate the path through the COVID-19 crisis. As new treatments are developed, the slow, rigorous testing by scientists will point us toward the measures that help and away from those that hinder.

Can scientists tell us when COVID-19 will end? It may be that COVID-19 is here to stay, much like flu, measles, or whooping cough (Sepkowitz). It is also likely that other forms of bacteria or viral diseases may sweep across the world in new future pandemics. When that happens, it will be science with integrity that society looks to for answers. And we can hope, as foreseen by Justin Rosenstein, that COVID-19 was a dress rehearsal to prepare our global community for a better response (39). As a science teacher, I am leaning into the learning.

*The painstakingly slow processes that are inherently part of science are what sustain the integrity of science.*

---

*Ken Turner, Professor of Science Education, teaches Chemistry, Math, Research Writing, and Engineering Design (not all at once) at University of Dubuque. He has taught students from 6th to 18th grades, and strives to bring an engaging lesson each day.  Ken has been published several times and is also part of the leadership of ILED, Iowa Leadership in Engineering Design; bringing engineering design workshops to educators of all levels across Iowa.*

*When not teaching, Ken is happy to settle back and enjoy island time with his wife, his children, his grandchildren, his friends, his dog, and anyone who would like to join a toast to a sunset.*

Photo credit p. 28: "Vaccine" by Spencer Davis, www.pixabay.com
Image credit p. 29: "Coronavirus" by Daniel Roberts, www.pixabay.com
Photo credit p. 30: "Chemist" by Michal Jarmoluk, www.pixabay.com
Photo credit p. 35: "Mask" by Juraj Varga, www.pixabay.com
Photo p. 36: "Anthony Fauci" Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

## Notes

[1] Dalton's Atomic Theory, published in 1801, was a seminal work, providing an explanation for the observations and conclusions of Boyle's Law, Charles Law, and the Law of Definite Proportion.

[2] Preprints, those manuscripts released before peer review has taken place, offer a quicker, additional route in the peer-review process. A preprint offers a glimpse of what the researcher(s) have found right now—answering the public demand for answers now. But a preprint is only as trustworthy as its authors and citations. It is a glimpse of what may be considered truth soon; but its timeliness has not yet been tested by a rigorous peer-review. I did leave the Howard preprint in the works cited because it gave a review of several preliminary studies. By the end of 2020 those findings had been confirmed by several peer-reviewed papers, including papers by Coclite et al.; Fisman et al.; Wang et al.; Worby and Chang.

## Works Cited

Bagdasarian, Natasha, et al. "Rapid Publications Risk the Integrity of Science in the Era of COVID-19." *BMC Medicine*, vol. 18, 25 Jun. 2020, p. 122.

Barr, Dana. "Integrity in Science." *Journal of Exposure Science and Environmental Epidemiology*, Vol. 17, 2007, p. 123.

Borba, Mayla, et al. "Effect of High vs Low Doses of Chloroquine Diphosphate as Adjunctive Therapy for Patients Hospitalized with Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) Infection: A Randomized Clinical Trial." *JAMA Network Open*, 24 Apr. 2020, https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2765499.

Boulware, David R., et al. "A Randomized Trial of Hydroxychloroquine as Postexposure Prophylaxis for Covid-19." *New England Journal of Medicine*, vol. 383, 6 Aug. 2020, pp. 517-525, http://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMoa2016638.

Calhoun, Cheshire. "Standing for Something." *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 92, no. 5, May 1995, pp. 235-260.

Cicerone, Ralph. "Ensuring Integrity in Science." *Science*, vol. 327, 5 Feb. 2010, pp. 624.

Coclite, Daniela, et al. "Face Mask Use in the Community for Reducing the Spread of COVID-19: A Systematic Review." *Frontiers in Medicine*, vol. 7, 2020. *NCBI*, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7835129/.

"Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Advice for the Public: When and How to Wear Face Masks." *World Health Organization*, 2020, https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/when-and-how-to-use-masks.

Duba, Mary Emily Briehl. "Does the Truth Matter? Truth-Telling as Resistance and Hope in a Post-Truth Era." *Character and . . . Transitions*, vol. 7, 2021, pp. 54-68. https://digitalud.dbq.edu/ojs/index.php/character/article/view/93/70.

Fisman, David, et al. "Bidirectional Impact of Imperfect Mask Use on Reproduction Number of COVID-19: A Next Generation Matrix Approach." *Infectious Disease Modeling*, vol. 5, 2020, pp. 405-408. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2468042720300191.

Grace, Michelle. "Character & Crisis: Toxic Workplaces and Culture Change." *Character and . . . Crisis*, vol. 8, 2022, pp. 44-62.

Hein, Molly. "Social Influencers: FOMO and Identity Crisis." *Character and . . . Crisis*, vol. 8, 2022, pp. 63-80.

Howard, Jeremy, et al. "Face Masks Against COVID-19: An Evidence Review." *Preprints*, 2020, http://doi.org/10.20944/preprints202004.0203.v1.

Johansson, Michael, et al. "SARS-CoV-2 Transmission from People Without COVID-19 Symptoms." *JAMA Network Open*, 7 Jan. 2021, https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2774707.

Karni, Annie, and Katie Thomas. "Trump Says He's Taking Hydroxychloroquine, Prompting Warning from Health Experts." *New York Times*, 18 May 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/18/us/politics/trump-hydroxychloroquine-covid-coronavirus.html.

Leung, Nancy H. L., et al. "Respiratory Virus Shedding in Exhaled Breath and Efficacy of Face Masks." *Nature Medicine*, vol. 26, no. 5, May 2020, pp. 676-680.

"Listings of WHO's response to COVID-19." *World Health Organization*, 29 June 2020, https://www.who.int/news/item/29-06-2020-covidtimeline.

Lovelace Jr., Berkeley. "Trump Says He Still Thinks Hydroxychloroquine Works in Treating Early Stage Coronavirus." *CNBC*, 28 July 2020, https://www.cnbc.com/2020/07/28/trump-says-he-still-thinks-hydroxychloroquine-works-in-treating-early-stage-coronavirus.html.

McCaw, Beth. *Crisis*. Wendt Research Team Meeting, 16 Sept. 2021, University of Dubuque.

Rose, Jonathan, and Paul Heywood. "Political Science Approaches to Integrity and Corruption." *Human Affairs*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2013, pp. 148-159.

Rosenstein, Justin, and the One Project Team. "The Architecture of Abundance: A Path to a Democratic Economy." *The New Possible: Visions of Our World Beyond Crisis*, edited by Clayton, Philip, et al., Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2021, pp. 33-44.

Sagan, Carl, and Anne Kalosh. "Bringing Science Down to Earth." *Hemispheres*, Oct. 1994, p. 99.

Sepkowitz, Kent. "The Blunt Truth on What Comes Next with Covid-19." *CNN*, 14 Sept. 2021, https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/14/opinions/blunt-truth-what-comes-next-covid-sepkowitz/index.html.

Stone, Howard. *Crisis Counseling*. Fortress Press, 1993.

"Stress in America 2020: A National Mental Health Crisis." *American Psychological Association*, Oct. 2020, https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2020/report-october.

Thomas, Josh. "Healing a Fractured World." *Character and . . . Crisis*, vol. 8, 2022, pp. 12-27.

Turner, Ken, and Adam Hoffman. "Integration, Authenticity, and Relevancy in College Science Through Engineering Design." *Journal of College Science Teaching*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2018, pp. 31-35.

Turner, Ken, et al. "Engineering Design for Engineering Design: Benefits, Models, and Examples from Practice." *I.E.: Inquiry in Education*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2016. http://digitalcommons.nl.edu/ie/vol8/iss2/5/.

Turner, Ken, et al. "ILED: Iowa Leadership in Engineering Design." *Journal of the Iowa Academy of Science*, vol. 127, no. 1, 2020, pp. 9-12.

Wang, Yuxin , et al. "How Effective is a Mask in Preventing COVID-19 Infection?" *Medical Devices & Sensors*, vol. 4, no. 1, 20 Dec. 2020. Wiley Online Library, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/mds3.10163.

Worby, Colin, and Hsiao-Han Chang. "Face Mask Use in the General Population and Optimal Resource Allocation During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Nature Communications*, vol. 11, 2020, https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-020-17922-x#citeas.

"WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard." *World Health Organization*, 2021, https://covid19.who.int.

Yu, Gina. "Trump Suggests Hydroxychloroquine May Protect Against Covid-19. Researchers Say There's No Evidence of That." *CNN Health*, 11 April 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/05/health/trump-lupus-hydroxychloroquine-coronavirus-protection/index.html.

# Character and Crisis: Toxic Workplaces and Culture Change

Michelle A. Grace

## Abstract

*No workplace is perfect, but anyone with co-workers knows that office culture is the difference between a job that you love and a place that you dread! Toxic workplaces can make the most dedicated employee lose productivity, disengage from the culture, and even leave the company. Extreme cases of a toxic culture sometimes lead to the end of the organization. Understanding the characteristics of a toxic employee or workplace can help identify the issues and work toward fixing the problem. This article explores toxic situations and strategies that people of good character can employ to remedy the situation.*

"Nearly every person I worked with, I saw cry at their desk," said a former marketing executive at Amazon. It is no wonder, considering the company practices "purposeful Darwinism." Employees coined this phrase in response to processes in which Amazon frequently thins its workforce and only the strong survive (Kantor and Streitfeld). This includes dismissing employees who are recovering from cancer, miscarriages, and other personal issues— employees who are not fully focused on their work and Amazon's leadership principles. None of these practices are illegal, but they certainly do not make me want to work there. Is this just unpleasant or is it toxic? Workplace analysts see reports of incivility and toxicity on the rise ("Is Your Workplace Tough—or Is It Toxic?"). The effects of a toxic work environment often manifest in physical and emotional symptoms of individual employees.

In a survey of 14,000 workers and 800 managers the effects of workplace incivility on individuals produces sobering results. Those working in toxic environments report decreases in work effort, spending less time at work, and decreased quality of work. It is troubling that 25% of those surveyed admitted to taking out frustrations on customers ("Is Your Workplace Tough—or Is It Toxic?").

The most disturbing result of workplace incivility (to me anyway!) is that employees can experience personality changes due to stressful workplace relationships (Gangal). Human personality is receptive to nearby changes. Think of soldiers in an active battle. During traumatic times, people may change their beliefs due to confusion, anxiety, and turbulent decisions. Think about that—the character that we have developed through family, friendships, and experiences over a lifetime can be altered by *work*? Work—that thing we do to pay the bills and create a "good life" for ourselves and our loved ones. Something is not right here!

*The crisis of toxic workplaces can be solved by people of character doing the work to repair the culture.*

There are several ways to fix the problem of working in a toxic workplace. The first (and quickest) is to leave the organization and find a better fit with your personal values. A lengthier process is to repair the culture of the organization. This is not easy; it takes time and fortitude to achieve. The crisis of toxic workplaces can be solved by people of character doing the work to repair the culture.

## The Nature of Crisis in an Organization

Before we delve into solutions for toxic organizational culture, we must first examine the problem and define some terms. In this section, I will define organizational culture, crisis, and toxic culture. We will also look at some examples of toxic workplaces and how they came to be.

Let's begin with organizational culture. According to Gotham Culture, an organizational consulting firm, culture includes an organization's expectations, experiences, philosophy, as well as the values that guide member behavior, and is expressed in member self-image, inner workings, interactions with the outside world, and future expectations (Cancialosi). While that is a comprehensive description, my favorite definition comes

from an old communication textbook: "Organizational culture is the way things are done around here" (Deal and Kennedy 125). I have always liked this definition as it makes the culture almost seem like a tangible thing, an element that surrounds us like oxygen.

*"Organizational culture is the way things are done around here."*

So, what is the image of a positive work environment? Many people (especially iGen and Millennials) envision free food and beverages, foosball tables, and flexible work schedules. While appealing, this is just scratching the surface of company culture. For many companies, the culture does not align with the values of the employees. Often, a culture changes with every management shakeup. An employee who was once satisfied and enjoyed their work environment may become disenchanted by a new CEO who has a different view of success than the founder or previous leadership team. When this happens, the workplace may become toxic.

Can an unsatisfactory organizational culture really be defined as a crisis? According to the Washington State Department of Social & Health Services the three basic elements of a crisis are 1) a stressful situation, 2) difficulty in coping, and 3) the timing of intervention ("Crisis Intervention"). That definition seems tailor-made for working in a toxic workplace.

So, how does an organizational culture become toxic? It is often hard to define a toxic culture. The first sign is often anxiety (that pit in your stomach) and "mustering all of your energy" just to enter the workplace. A culture can turn toxic situationally—a new supervisor from outside the company, a critical deadline, or restructuring. While a toxic culture can sneak up quickly, fixing a toxic culture takes much more time and intention.

Suzanne Benoit, human resources consultant, defines a toxic workplace as "a place where surrounding work units are distracted by gossip, drama, and unproductive employee activities" (9). Toxic workplaces are often considered the result of toxic employers and/or toxic employees who are "[m]otivated by personal gain (power, money, fame or special status)," use "[u]nethical, mean-spirited and sometimes illegal means . . . to maintain or increase power, money or special status" or "divert attention away from their performance shortfalls and misdeeds." Toxic workers do "not recognize a duty to" their employer or "their co-workers in terms of ethics or professional conduct toward others." They define their relationships with

co-workers by whether they like or trust them, rather than by organizational structure (14).

Basically, whenever an entity (an individual, a division, the leadership team) puts its own interests above those of the organization or above other entities of the organization, there is the likelihood of a toxic environment. In the next sections, I will share examples of a toxic culture. Toxic culture can be a small blemish in the history of an organization, the reason a company closes its doors, or the motivation to restructure and repair a tarnished image. In most cases, a toxic culture is due to a group of individuals whose actions do not align with the mission and vision of the organization.

*Toxic Workplace Culture*          I doubt that most organizations set out to be toxic or even view their practices as toxic. Many people find themselves in a toxic environment after responding to postings for creative, spontaneous, forward-thinking candidates, only to find themselves in organizations seeking employees that they can control (Coccia 32). How does an organization's culture become toxic? Can a company change its culture?

You might be surprised to learn the consequences of company culture. Any organization can fall victim to culture problems. A tragic example of this is one of the most respected organizations world-wide: the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, better known as NASA.

NASA has signified innovation and success for decades. Life and death decisions are made daily in this organization designed to push the limits of humanity. Granted, mistakes are made in every workplace. Many of us learn valuable lessons from those errors. A superior once comforted me after I made an error by telling me, *it's not rocket science*. The stakes are clearly higher when human life hangs in the balance and it *is* rocket science! What is worse is when no decision is made because no one wanted to be "that guy" who delivered the bad news.



*High stakes rocket science*

On January 18, 1986, the nation was collectively stunned to watch the Space Shuttle Challenger explode 73 seconds after takeoff. The official cause of this accident was cold weather and o-rings. An o-ring is a small piece of rubber designed to create a seal at the junction of multiple parts. O-rings are common and very inexpensive, but can degrade when there is too much

pressure or exposure to extreme heat or cold. Cold temperatures caused the rupture of the o-rings on the Challenger, but the o-rings only had the chance to rupture in the cold because of NASA's flawed decision-making process and the silencing of dissenting voices.

Like any other organization, NASA has goals and deadlines. Such was the case in the Challenger launch. This event was seen as critical by NASA executives as media interest in its missions had decreased. With the inclusion of a high school teacher on the Challenger crew, televisions were tuned to the launch in every American classroom—including my own eighth grade class. Do the stakes get any higher?

Those of us who remember this tragedy often forget that the launch had already been delayed due to unseasonable cold at the launch site in Florida. With the world watching, further delays could not be tolerated. The launch happened as planned against the advice of a few opposing voices and resulted in catastrophe.

In 1990, the Augustine Report was issued after a thorough investigation. The results pointed to the culture of NASA as a key factor. "The most fundamental ingredient of a successful space program . . . is the culture or work environment in which it is conducted" (*Report of the Advisory Committee*). The committee members proposed several recommendations for beliefs and assumptions that should characterize NASA going forward:



*Challenger catastrophe*

- The success of a mission should take precedence over cost and deadlines.

- Space flight requires open communication in which individuals are encouraged to report on problems or anomalies.

- The space program cannot succeed in an environment where avoiding failure is seen as an important role.

- The space program should not get spread too thin by working simultaneously on different projects (Miller).

To many of us, the recommendations above may seem like simple fixes. But in an environment of strict procedures and clear leadership hierarchy,

change is easier said than done. Going from a "keep your head down and your mouth shut" atmosphere to a "speak up loud and clear" culture does not happen overnight. Change must start at the top and requires constant reinforcement. Later in this article, there are some suggestions for initiating change and removing toxic elements.

NASA is certainly not the only organization with hierarchy and control issues. The pursuit of power and profit can change the culture of a department or organization. This was certainly the case with Theranos, a medical technology startup in Silicon Valley. While profit was greatly important to this organization, the cause of the toxic environment at Theranos was not so much about dollars but about power and control. Many former employees named secrecy, lying, and the lack of interdepartmental transparency (open sharing of information, communication, and accountability) as reasons they left the company (Dunn et al., "Ex-Theranos Employees").

Theranos began as the brainchild of Elizabeth Holmes while she was a student at Stanford University. She was passionate about her idea to test for hundreds of medical conditions with "just a few drops of blood." Her mission was to prevent premature deaths due to undiscovered illness. After losing a beloved uncle, she wanted to bring her idea to the masses to make testing easier and to diagnose illness early enough to treat. The question was how.

The story of Theranos spans a mere fifteen years from inception to demise (2003 – 2018). The early years make a great success story—the first female billionaire entrepreneur, over $6 million in funding shortly after the founding of the company, a stellar board of trustees, creation of hundreds of jobs, and a partnership to have a Theranos testing



*Theranos founder Elizabeth Holmes*

center in Walgreens drug stores all over the United States (Kent). But in 2014 doubts began to creep in about the validity of the company and its products. The environment changed and employees once dedicated to the cause began to reevaluate their allegiance to Theranos and Holmes.

Up to this point, the public, Theranos trustees, and even the media viewed Theranos as an unmitigated success (Weisul). In October of 2015, articles published in the *Wall Street Journal* lifted the curtain on the very secretive company and its founder. John Carreyrou had uncovered scathing evidence of poor management, employee dissatisfaction, and overstatement of their

products' capabilities. Statements that over 1,000 tests can be performed with "just a few drops of blood" were disproven even as Holmes went on a media campaign to minimize the effects of the *Wall Street Journal* article (Volk).

After this, things went downhill quickly. Investors sued Theranos and criminal charges of fraud soon followed. By June of 2018 Holmes and her Chief Operating Officer Sunny Balwani were indicted on 11 charges, including wire fraud. These are just the criminal charges. What happened inside the walls at Theranos was equally disturbing. Bullying. Intimidation. Subterfuge. Outright threats. In comparing the environment at Theranos to Benoit's definition of a toxic workplace, you can check off items like a shopping list.

1. *A place where surrounding work units are distracted by gossip, drama, and unproductive employee activities* (Benoit 9). Former Theranos chemist Erica Cheung spoke out about the expectation to work all hours of the day and night to process samples and the need to run tests multiple times to get the expected result. She had reservations from day one while witnessing paranoia and secrecy among leadership and the requirement that every employee sign a non-disclosure agreement (Berke).

The secrecy also took on a different form at Theranos—silo mentality. On farms, silos are great. In business, they can be toxic. Silo mentality is a mindset in which departments or sectors do not share information with other parts of the company. This reduces efficiency and morale and can contribute to the demise of a productive organizational culture (Gleeson). Theranos used this technique to hide the lack of progress in their product development. By only allowing employees access to certain information, no one was able to see the full picture—no one but Holmes and her right-hand man, Balwani.
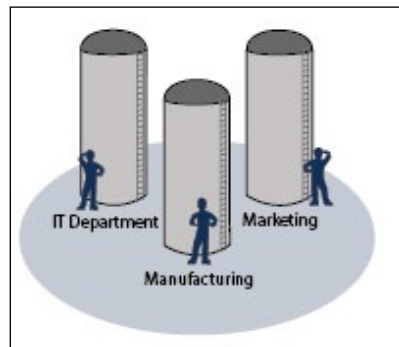


*Silo mentality*

2. *Toxic workplaces are often considered the result of toxic employers and/or toxic employees who are "[m]otivated by personal gain (power, money, fame or special status)," use "[u]nethical, mean-spirited and*

*sometimes illegal means to . . . maintain or increase power, money or special status"* or *"divert attention away from their performance shortfalls and misdeeds"* (Benoit 14). Tyler Schulz is a name you will see again. Schulz began his career at Theranos as an intern after "Falling in love with her (Holmes') vision." Over his time at Theranos, this feeling drastically changed and he decided to let Holmes know. Schulz is not just your run-of-the-mill employee. He learned about Theranos from his grandfather, former Secretary of State and Theranos board member George Schulz. For this reason, the younger Schulz felt that his opinion would be respected. He was wrong.

In April of 2014, Tyler Schulz could no longer stay silent about the flaws he saw in the lab tests. He sent Holmes a detailed email about doctored research and failed quality control efforts. After a few days of silence, he received a response. Not from Holmes to whom he addressed the email, but from Balwani, the COO and Holmes' romantic partner. The email response was eight pages long and written in red font. The email called Schulz arrogant and threatened that if he was anyone else, he would have been fired for his insubordination (Hofmann).

At this point, Schulz had had enough. He left Theranos and began sharing information with *Wall Street Journal* writer John Carreyrou. Once Holmes and Balwani found out about this, they enlisted George Schulz to reason with Tyler. When Tyler refused to sign a second NDA, Theranos took legal action and he lost the very close relationship he had with his grandfather. George told Tyler, "They're trying to convince me that you're stupid, but they can't do that. They can try to convince me that you're wrong and in this case I do believe you're wrong" (Dunn et al., "Ex-Theranos CEO Elizabeth Holmes"). Tyler Schulz's parents covered his $500,000 in legal fees and were almost forced to sell their house to defend their son. As the lies, secrecy, and outright fraud hit the news, George Schulz saw the light. He resigned from the Theranos board and worked to rehabilitate his relationship with Tyler. But by this point, serious damage had been done (Hofmann).

3.  *Toxic workers do "not recognize a duty to" their employer or "their co-workers in terms of ethics or professional conduct toward others"* (Benoit 14). In the height of the Theranos dream, many employees were recruited from another Silicon Valley giant, Apple. Engineers and product specialists left behind their valuable shares of Apple stock to be a part of the next big thing. Adam Vollmer joined Theranos, motivated

by Holmes' vision and brilliance. According to Vollmer, "we wanted to see her become that billion-dollar leader, literally everybody wants to work for the next Steve Jobs" (Dunn et al., "Ex-Theranos Employees").

What the former Apple employees got instead were the most loathed behaviors in the office—lying, mistrust, and lack of respect. In an article outlining the behaviors of culturally successful organizations, the authors polled thousands of workers. They found that the most highly valued element of culture as rated by employees was respect. In fact, respect for employees is 18 times more likely to predict a high rating for culture than any other factor (Sull and Sull). This was missing in the culture at Theranos. In the resignation letter of engineer Justin Maxwell, he vented his disdain for the lack of respect for employees at Theranos.

*Another key element of a poor organizational culture—putting the aspirations of executives above the core values and cultural elements that matter to employees.*

> I wish I could say better things. But I think you know exactly what is going on at Theranos. . . . Lying is a disgusting habit and it flows through conversations here like it's our own currency. But I really truly believe you know it already. And for some reason, I can't figure out why you allow it to continue. (Dunn et al., "Ex-Theranos Employees")

This statement is pretty telling. It also reveals another key element of a poor organizational culture—putting the aspirations of executives above the core values and cultural elements that matter to employees (Sull and Sull).

4.  *Toxic workers define their relationships with co-workers by whether they like or trust them, rather than by organizational structure* (Benoit 14). It has already been established that there was no trust between leadership and the employees at Theranos. This was the case with Ian Gibbons, chief scientist at Theranos. Gibbons was hired by Holmes in 2005. As a scientist, he was concerned about the data he was seeing and became increasingly vocal about the discrepancies and errors being reported. After several years of his findings and advice falling on deaf ears, Gibbons was called into a meeting with Holmes in May of 2013. After seeing what happened to others who spoke up, Gibbons was afraid

he was about to get fired and attempted suicide. Gibbons died a week later. Rather than offer her condolences to his wife Rochelle, Holmes instead demanded the immediate return of all Theranos confidential property to the company headquarters (Hartmans).

## Addressing Crises in Organizational Culture

Earlier we questioned whether a toxic culture could be repaired. All of those leadership books were right, an organization *can* modify its culture . . . for the better! For an individual working in a toxic workplace the answer might be to leave the organization. For others, leaving the organization is not enough. Those brave enough can take the crisis public through a process known as whistleblowing. For leaders who want to reform the organization, they must choose a plan to combat the specific elements of toxicity. I will share some frameworks for reforming a toxic workplace culture. We will also look at a success story of a company that overcame their culture crisis. It was not easy or fast, but Matthias Müller was able to steer Volkswagen (VW) out of a global scandal and simultaneously repair the corrupted internal culture. But first, whistleblowing. As an individual in an organization, one may feel that this is the only option to bring issues to light and to repair a toxic workplace.

*Whistleblowing*        Whistleblowing is not for the faint of heart. A typical whistleblower is someone who makes decisions based upon their moral character and who is not influenced by corporate reward/punishment systems (Trevino and Youngblood). While their actions were based on their ethical beliefs, many whistleblowers suffer negative consequences for speaking out. In simple terms, a whistleblower is someone who reports waste, fraud, abuse, corruption, or dangers to public health and safety to an entity in the position to rectify the wrongdoing ("What Is a Whistleblower?"). A survey by the Ethics Resource Center reports that up to a quarter of whistleblowers report retaliation after speaking out (Ladika). A small list of consequences include isolation from co-workers, loss of their job, and even being shunned from their entire industry (Carter 209).

*While their actions were based on their ethical beliefs, many whistleblowers suffer negative consequences for speaking out.*

There are many examples of whistleblowers in our history. Indeed, our country would be a much different place without such heroes as Mark Felt (the infamous Deep Throat who broke the Watergate scandal in the 1970's), Karen Silkwood (who spoke out about dangerous work conditions at a plutonium plant and radioactive contamination of employees), and Jeffrey Wigand (who broke the story about tobacco industry executives secretly adding addictive elements to cigarettes). While brave and now famous (all of these individuals have at least one movie chronicling their story), all suffered for their efforts. Mark Felt lived in fear and secrecy until three years before his death. Karen Silkwood was killed in a car accident on her way to meet with a *New York Times* reporter. Dr. Jeffrey Wigand was once a top executive at Brown & Willamson (a tobacco company). After he blew the whistle, this PhD in Biochemistry ended his career as a high school chemistry teacher (Whelan).

Remember Erica Cheung and Tyler Schulz? Both independently and together, these two former Theranos employees blew the whistle on the unethical and illegal actions they witnessed. Schulz worked with a journalist to get the story out to the public. Cheung sent an anonymous email to a regulatory body reporting the inconsistencies and downright lies in the lab findings being reported by Theranos executives.

There is some good news for current-day whistleblowers. In 2010, Congress passed the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act. This legislation was designed to end the "too big to fail" financial service protection and bailouts (Frank). It also includes protection and compensation for whistleblowers. Whistleblowers are entitled to compensation if sanctions are imposed based on their sharing of information. They are also protected by antiretaliation rules that will protect their job or trigger a jury trial if they are terminated so that they can be reinstated in their position and receive compensation for back-pay and legal fees (Frank).

*Leader Led Reform*          For those with influence or position, the change in company culture can be initiated from within. This is how Matthias Müller chose to reform the image and culture of Volkswagen. In 2014, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) tests had uncovered discrepancies in road emissions testing on VW vehicles. Months later in 2015, VW admitted



*Matthias Müller, Volkswagen CEO 2015-2018*

wrongdoing in which a software patch was installed in their cars to falsely report emissions data. Volkswagen publicly apologized and planned to refit millions of vehicles affected by the emissions data (Hakim and Ewing). Surviving this scandal would be no easy feat. Sweeping changes were necessary if Müller hoped to secure a future for Volkswagen.

While some internal changes were already in progress, Müller needed to quicken the pace when he was elevated to CEO after his predecessor, Martin Winterkorn, abruptly resigned in September of 2015. While many in the industry expected Müller to pick up where Winterkorn left off, Müller had plans of his own. His main objective: destroy the hierarchy (Boston).

Müller considered the "old guard" responsible for the emissions scandal and set forth to dismantle the decision-making bottlenecks caused by the multiple layers of management. He flattened the organization chart and gave control back to the individual brands. "We don't need any 'yes men'. The future belongs to the courageous. I am appealing to the curious, to the nonconformists, to the pioneers" (Boston et al.). That is a culture-breaking statement if one was ever said. Any employee who believed that they were not valued was ready to listen. As was Müller. He shared his mobile phone number directly with decision makers. Now they had direct access instead of the layers of handlers previously in place to shield the CEO from management (Boston).

Müller instigated further hierarchy-busting changes; he moved board members between the parent company and its core brands, attacked executive privilege by selling the corporate jet, implemented an open-door policy, and cut the levels of management needed for approval. Müller signaled his
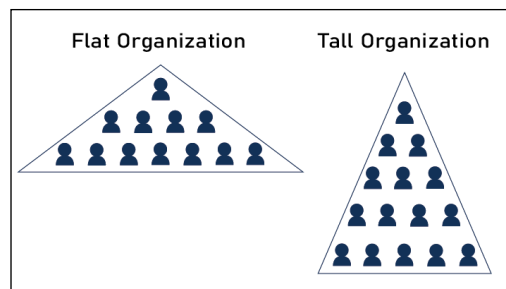


*Organizational Hierarchies*

plans for a secure future by creating two new positions—chief of strategy and chief of digitization. In a 2016 interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, a chief designer for the VW brand stated, "There is no more hemming and hawing. They make decisions, we are moving faster" (Boston et al.).

This is a great example and gives us hope for the salvation of other toxic organizations. Organizational change takes time, effort, reinforcement, and support. Müller certainly did not achieve this on his own. He had a team

and a strategy to turn his vision into reality at Volkswagen. After many years of work and reparations, Volkswagen is again a respected brand in the automobile industry.

*Guiding Principles and Strategies for Achieving Cultural Change*
To properly plan modifications to your organizational culture, there are five guiding principles to evaluate. This may seem like a simple list, but a deep and honest look at the existing cultural elements below will determine whether changes are needed.

- Cultural change takes place more effectively when worked at three levels: organization, team, and individual.

- Culture change is accelerated by connecting individual beliefs to organizational results.

- Culture change requires a planned and disciplined implementation cascade.

- Culture change is accelerated by using a "Leader Led Learning" approach.

- Technology should be leveraged for communications, measurement, and reporting success to reinforce cultural change (Heckelman et al.).

If further action is needed to modify the culture of the organization, there are many strategies that can be implemented, depending on the type of changes needed. I will focus on two possible models. Attraction, Selection, Attrition (ASA) is a good strategy to utilize when broad changes need to be made in personnel. The BEAR model is useful when the change element is the behavior of individual organizational members.

*ASA: Attraction, Selection, Attrition*          Organizational psychologist Ben Schneider created the ASA framework to examine the culture of an organization through its people. ASA asks three questions:

- Who is drawn to a given organization?

- Who ends up being selected?

- Who stays? (Neville and Schneider 42)

The ASA framework works best in a culture where the employees are the toxic element of the organization. By analyzing the type of individual that is attracted to the organization, who is hired, and who stays, the ASA model can help to reframe the hiring and training processes of an organization. This

is not an immediate culture fix, but it will right the ship and allow it to smoothly sail into the future. The ASA framework was used by Matthias Müller in his reformation of Volkswagen following the 2014 EPA emissions reporting scandal.

- **Attraction**: Organizational culture is influenced even before an employee joins the company. Organizations should review their recruiting materials and interactions with potential employees. If those applying for positions with the organization do not meet the mission and values of the firm, changes should be made in the method of recruitment and the language used in materials.
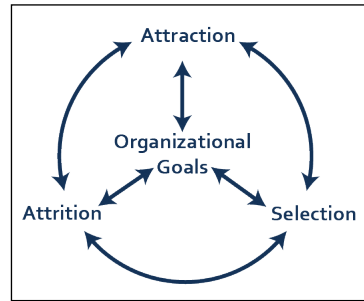


*ASA Framework*

- **Selection**: Analysis of those employees who are offered a position and how those individuals differ from the population as a whole will show the shared personality of the organization. By identifying personality traits and undesirable behaviors, employers can change the selection process of hiring by concentrating on the positive elements that they want to infuse into the organizational character.

- **Attrition**: It is true that the organization shapes the individual, but attrition is a huge factor in the formation of the culture. Attrition refers to employees who leave the organization due to resignation or retirement. This is a huge element to study in a toxic culture. Those who stay longest are most compatible with the organization. Determining who is staying provides a snapshot of the existing culture. Examining who is leaving shows the culture elements that are not accepted by the organization as a whole (Neville and Schneider 42).

*The BEAR Model*          The BEAR model is a good framework for changing behaviors. BEAR (Beliefs, Experiences, Actions, and Results) speaks to the link between the beliefs of the individual and their behaviors. The desired outcome of the BEAR model is to emphasize core beliefs to maintain organizational culture and to contribute to future success (Heckelman et al. 27).

- **Beliefs**: Beliefs define what a person values, prioritizes, and what motivates what they do and why. Individual organizational members need to see the link between their beliefs, and how they affect the organization as a whole.

- **Experiences**: Experiences help to shape beliefs. The lack of alignment of the employee's beliefs with the values of the organization can cause individuals to be less motivated to act in a manner that produces positive effects for the organization. It is important to assess the individual's beliefs through surveys, focus groups, or direct conversation to determine appropriate ways to motivate employees to achieve positive results.

- **Actions**: The beliefs people hold cause them to act and behave in a particular way. This is especially important if there is a misalignment between the values and beliefs of the organization's leaders. If leadership is viewed as disingenuous, it will affect the beliefs and actions of organization members.

- **Results**: What a person does causes an outcome/result. For this approach to work, leaders need to create experiences to reinforce beliefs. Employees must be empowered to make decisions and this needs to be supported by leadership (Heckelman et al. 25).

Organizational change is not a light switch; it is more like a sunrise. It must take place slowly and elements for success are revealed as the light increases and the environment warms. There may be clouds on the horizon or rain in the forecast, but warnings and an umbrella are necessary tools for a successful process. Some strategies may fail and some steps may bear repeating. But each new day brings promise and hope.
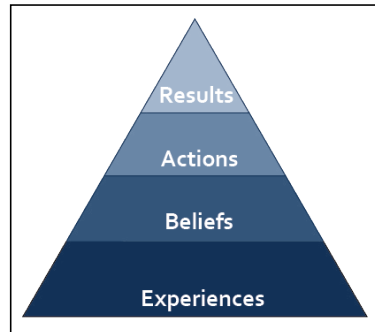
BEAR Model

## Conclusion

American business is in a crisis. The increasing prevalence of toxic workplaces calls for both employees and employers of good character to consider whether their values line up with those of the organization and take steps to correct the course of their company culture, whether through whistleblowing, resigning, or administratively making broad strategic changes.

At the end of 2021, many people were returning to the office after working at home or being reinstated from furloughs during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The pandemic gave workers time to reflect on their lives and many decided that they did not want to return to the same culture that they left. With hundreds of people deciding not to return to their pre-COVID job, the job market is in chaos. Even companies with good reputations are feeling the staffing sting. Prospective employees have the upper hand in employment negotiations as employers struggle to fill multiple openings. With one in five Americans leaving jobs due to poor company culture (Cheng), organizational culture is more important now as we struggle with engagement and connection.

Many workers have discovered another desirable element of a positive workplace—work/life balance. Self-care has gone from a nice idea to a mantra in many people's lives. When going to work is the cause for anxiety or physical manifestations of stress, self-care is no longer a nice idea. It is a necessity.

The easiest way to fix your place in a toxic culture is to leave it. You can wait for a disaster like NASA, tolerate lying and secrecy like Theranos, or you can do what is best for you by finding a new organization where the goals and values align with your own. I will leave you with a slightly modified blessing of my Irish people: May the road rise up to meet you. May the wind always be at your back. May the sun shine warm upon your face; may you find joy and satisfaction in your workplace, and find a new one if you don't!

*Organizational culture is more important now as we struggle with engagement and connection.*

*Michelle Grace is an Associate Professor of Communication at the University of Dubuque. Her areas of study are organizational communication and leadership. Michelle teaches several classes on workplace communication and strategy to undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Dubuque. In addition to her work with communication students, she also consults with UD's Physician Assistant program and coordinates the co-curricular leadership experience for the Master in Management program. Michelle is the founding advisor for the National Society of Leadership and Success at UD. When she is not working with students, Michelle enjoys spending time with her dogs Luna, Stella, and Pippa.*

Photo credit p. 48: "Challenger explosion" by Kennedy Space Center, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Photo credit p. 49: "Theranos Chairman, CEO and Founder Elizabeth Holmes" by TechCrunch, CC BY 2.0, https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Photo credit p. 54: "Matthais Müller" by Volkswagen AG, CC BY 3.0, https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0, via Wikimedia Commons

## Works Cited

Benoit, Suzanne V. *Toxic Employees: Great Companies Resolve This Problem, You Can Too!* Benoit Consulting Services, 2011.

Berke, Rick. "From Protégée to Whistleblower: A Former Theranos Scientist Says Elizabeth Holmes Should 'Come Forward and Apologize.'" *STAT*, 1 May 2019, https://www.statnews.com/2019/05/01/from-protegee-to-whistleblower-a-former-theranos-scientist-says-elizabeth-holmes-should-come-forward-and-apologize/.

Boston, William. "Careers: VW Still a Work in Progress—New Chief Takes Aim at Auto Maker's Culture, Hierarchy amid Large Management Overhaul." *Wall Street Journal, Eastern Edition*, 24 Feb. 2016, p. B.7. ProQuest, http://www.proquest.com/docview/1767521100?accountid=28604.

Boston, William, et al. "VW Says 'Culture' Flaw Led To Crisis." *Wall Street Journal, Eastern Edition*, 11 Dec. 2015, p. B.1. ProQuest, http://www.proquest.com/docview/1747539471/abstract/2480CFCD89A4B37PQ/1.

Cancialosi, C. "What Is Organizational Culture?" *GothamCulture*, 17 July 2017, https://gothamculture.com/what-is-organizational-culture-definition/.

Carter, Melody. "Deceit and Dishonesty as Practice: The Comfort of Lying." *Nursing Philosophy*, vol. 17, no. 3, May 2016, pp. 202–10. *Wiley Online Library*, https://doi.org/10.1111/nup.12129.

Cheng, Andy. "5 Examples of Excellent Company Culture During COVID-19." *RingCentral*, 13 July 2020, https://www.ringcentral.com/us/en/blog/5-examples-of-excellent-company-culture-during-covid-19/.

Coccia, Cynthia. "Avoiding a 'Toxic' Organization." *Nursing Management*, vol. 29, no. 5, May 1998, pp. 32–33. *EBSCOhost*, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=afh&AN=1931379&site=ehost-live.

"Crisis Intervention." *Washington State Department of Social and Health Services*, https://www.dshs.wa.gov/book/export/html/490. Accessed 10 Nov. 2021.

Deal, Terrence E., and Allen A. Kennedy. *Corporate Cultures: Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life*. New ed., Penguin Books, 1988.

Dunn, Taylor, et al. "Ex-Theranos CEO Elizabeth Holmes Says 'I Don't Know' 600-plus Times in Never-before-Broadcast Deposition Tapes." *ABC News*, 23 Jan. 2019, https://abcnews.go.com/Business/theranos-ceo-elizabeth-holmes-600-times-broadcast-deposition/story?id=60576630.

Dunn, Taylor, et al. "Ex-Theranos Employees Describe Culture of Secrecy at Elizabeth Holmes' Startup: 'The Dropout' Podcast Ep. 1." *ABC News*, 12 Mar. 2019, https://abcnews.go.com/Business/theranos-employees-describe-culture-secrecy-elizabeth-holmes-startup/story?id=60544673.

Frank, Barney. H.R.4173 - 111th Congress (2009-2010): Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act. Public Law 111-203, 21 July 2010, https://www.congress.gov/bill/111th-congress/house-bill/4173/text. Library of Congress.

Gangal, Aditi. "Personality Changes Due to the Stressful Workplace and Healing Methods." *Info That Matter*, 17 Sept. 2021, https://infothatmatter.com/2020/09/17/personality-changes-stressful-workplace-healing-methods/.

Gleeson, Brent. "The Silo Mentality: How to Break Down the Barriers." *Forbes*, 2 Oct. 2013, https://www.forbes.com/sites/brentgleeson/2013/10/02/the-silo-mentality-how-to-break-down-the-barriers/.

Hakim, Danny, and Jack Ewing. "In the Driver's Seat." *New York Times, Late Edition (East Coast)*, 2 Oct. 2015, p. B.1. ProQuest, http://www.proquest.com/docview/1718276116/abstract/D62396FFFB024ABDPQ/1.

Hartmans, Avery. "The Way Theranos Reportedly Reacted to the Suicide of Its Chief Scientist Was Unbelievably Cold." *Business Insider*, 19 Mar. 2019, https://www.businessinsider.com/theranos-ceo-elizabeth-holmes-employee-death-2016-9.

Heckelman, Wendy L., et al. "Driving Culture Transformation During Large-Scale Change." *OD Practitioner*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2013, pp. 25–30.

Hofmann, Sarah. "Theranos Whistleblower Risked His Relationship with His Family to Expose Fraud." *Fraud Conference News*, 25 June 2019, https://www.fraudconferencenews.com/home/2019/6/25/theranos-whistleblower-risked-his-relationship-with-his-family-to-expose-fraud.

"Is Your Workplace Tough—or Is It Toxic?" *Knowledge at Wharton*, Aug. 2015, https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/is-your-workplace-tough-or-is-it-toxic/.

Kantor, Jodi, and David Streitfeld. "Inside Amazon: Wrestling Big Ideas in a Bruising Workplace." *The New York Times*, 15 Aug. 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/16/technology/inside-amazon-wrestling-big-ideas-in-a-bruising-workplace.html.

Kent, Chloe. "Theranos Timeline: Where Did It All Go Wrong?" *Medical Device Network*, 4 July 2019, https://www.medicaldevice-network.com/features/theranos-failure-timeline/.

Ladika, Susan. "Whistling While You Work." *Workforce Management*, vol. 91, no. 4, Apr. 2012, p. 26. EBSCOhost, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=74654142&site=ehost-live.

Miller, Katherine I. "Organizational Communication." *The International Encyclopedia of Communication*, John Wiley & Sons, 2008. *Wiley Online Library*, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405186407.wbieco018.

Neville, Lukas, and Benjamin Schneider. "Why Is It so Hard to Change a Culture? It's the People." *Organization Development and Review*, vol. 53, no. 1, Jan. 2021, pp. 41–46.

*Report of the Advisory Committee on the Future of the U.S. Space Program*. National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Dec. 1990. NASA History Division, https://history.nasa.gov/augustine/racfup1.htm.

Sull, Donald, and Charles Sull. "10 Things Your Corporate Culture Needs to Get Right." *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 16 Sept. 2021, https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/10-things-your-corporate-culture-needs-to-get-right/.

Trevino, Linda K., and Stuart A. Youngblood. "Bad Apples in Bad Barrels: A Causal Analysis of Ethical Decision-Making Behavior." *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol. 75, no. 4, 1990, pp. 378–85. *APA PsycNet*, https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.75.4.378.

Volk, Steve. "The Rise and Fall of Theranos." *Discover*, vol. 38, no. 1, Feb. 2017, p. 44. EBSCOhost, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=119493310&site=ehost-live.

Weisul, Kimberly. "The Longest Game." *Inc.*, vol. 37, no. 8, Oct. 2015, pp. 48–147. EBSCOhost, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=109370323&site=ehost-live.

"What Is a Whistleblower?" *National Whistleblower Center*, https://www.whistleblowers.org/what-is-a-whistleblower/. Accessed 28 Jan. 2022.

Whelan, Nathaniel. "History's Most Famous Whistleblowers." *WorldAtlas*, 31 July 2020, https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/history-s-most-famous-whistleblowers.html.

# Social Influencers: FOMO and Identity Crisis

Molly Hein

## Abstract

*In today's society, people desire to share their world with others from behind a screen. We follow social influencers and tend to conform our thoughts and beliefs to align with what we see on social media. Through our virtual window, we find comfort in knowing we are not missing out on life by keeping up with the trends of influencers. We sacrifice our unique character and individual self when we imitate others. The good news is that we don't have to conform to the identity and beliefs of others; we can maintain our own uniqueness by being diligent about what we see online and taking simple steps to maintain our individual identity.*

On a cold, blustery day you and a friend are visiting the Auschwitz Museum, a site where over one million people lost their lives just decades before. People who were mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, and friends; individuals who laughed, cried, and once enjoyed the fresh air and freedom around them, just as you are doing today.

Looking down you see railroad tracks; they are just as drab and gloomy as the day surrounding you. The wind picks up as tears form in your eyes. You reach into your pocket, searching with urgency. You find what you were looking for. You pull your cell phone out of your pocket and ask your friend to snap a picture of you. A snapshot of you, walking on the railroad tracks. Walking as though the tracks are simply a balance beam, rather than the same tracks that led hundreds of thousands of innocent people to their last breath of fresh air. You recall that a popular YouTuber that you follow for skin care regimens posted images of herself walking on railroad tracks outside of Auschwitz last year, and you have a strong desire to also share this moment in your life. Your photo is promptly posted to Instagram with

the caption "Spending the day at the Auschwitz Memorial, remembering the lives that were lost." You posted this on a whim, out of your desire to broadcast your empathy to the world, as you have seen someone popular do before. What you failed to realize is the actual lack of empathy you demonstrated in creating a post you hope will go viral from a place that silently holds a tremendous amount of pain and loss of life.



The Auschwitz Museum is not the only place social media influencers and their followers deem worthy of photo opportunities. Imagine participating in the dangerous trend of hanging out of a moving train in Sri Lanka while kissing your significant other or licking a stack of taco shells while working at Taco Bell (and losing your job for it) just because others are doing the same.

*Auschwitz Memorial's take on photo opportunists*

As a society, we have normalized communicating with one another in ways that do not involve direct face-to-face interactions. We are willing to accept the perceptions and judgments of others as a reliable source (Deutsch and Gerard 635). Rather than in-person relationships, we long to connect through filters, often by posting photos and videos on social media platforms. Not only do we desire to share the parts of our lives that make us stand out, but we allow social influencers to inspire our decisions and cultivate our sense of belonging to society.

The desire to share our lives with the world to avoid that feeling of missing out has led to a growing crisis of identity as people look to social influencers as models to imitate; this allows the normalization of following the influencer, rather than considering our own individuality, our own values, and our own character. The good news is there are steps we can take to find our way back to focusing on our individual identity. A few of these steps include finding reliable sources of information and being vigilant about time spent following others versus time spent focusing on our individuality.

## Social Influencers and FOMO

One reason people strive to influence others is that influencing others is visible, it is something that can be measured based on the number of

followers or likes on a post (Beck). Another motivation is the strong desire to be liked, also known as being popular (Dominguez). The behaviors people will exhibit just to fit in are varied and surprising!

These behaviors and actions shared on social media, whether to influence or merely to be liked, are not limited to social influencers. Many social media users experience what is known as the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), which is what connects the average person to the social influencer. FOMO is associated with higher levels of behavioral engagement with social media (Przyblyski 1847). The average person, who will be referred to as Average Sam, has FOMO about what is popular and trending on social media. Average Sam's FOMO allows them to be influenced by what popular people, aka social influencers, are doing. This influence allows them to focus on identifying and connecting with people through others' activities and interests, regardless of their own individuality and what makes them unique.



*Participating in the dangerous trend of kissing while hanging out of a moving train*

The term "social influencer" brings to mind other terms such as "creator," "trend setter," "instigator," "blogger," "popular," "social media," or "admired." Regardless of terms, public relations expert Angeles Moreno and her colleagues define influencers as active social media users who are "opinion leaders who can use their online platforms to diffuse information and affect the attitudes and behaviors of their audiences" (246). Social influencers can affect the lifestyle and buying behaviors of their followers; this phenomenon is described as social contagion, "the spread of belief, affect, or behavior where people influence one another" (Sijm et al. 131). *Forbes Magazine* characterized a social media influencer as someone who utilizes their platform to persuade and influence their audience of many followers on social media (Kirwan).

From the definitions given of a social influencer, a common theme emerges. A social influencer has a social platform and is trusted by others. Also, although the term *many* was used to classify a social influencer, this term is nonquantifiable. Monetary examples provide context to such nonquantifiable words that describe the audience of a social influencer. CNBC determined the number of social media followers an influencer needs to make $100,000 per year. On YouTube, an influencer needs at least 1,000

subscribers and 24 million annual views to earn $100K. On Instagram, one needs 5,000 followers and a minimum of 308 sponsored posts per year (Scipioni). TikTok, which grew 800% from January 2019 through June 2020, would earn an influencer $100,000 annually with 10,000 subscribers and over 270 million visits a year (Scipioni). This context provides some perspective on how the term *many* is defined within society.

Social influencers tend to nudge the thoughts, opinions, and mindset of others in a certain direction through a simple online post. Economist Richard Thaler and law professor Cass Sunstein define a "nudge," whether purposeful or not, as "the choice architecture that alters people's behaviors in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives" (6).

Someone scrolling through social media may be nudged into forming an opinion or mindset to avoid missing out on something (*The Social Dilemma*). When a person feels they are missing out on something, they feel unpopular (Alutaybi et al). Feelings of unpopularity cause the body to release an internal, inflammatory response as though preparing for an attack (Dominguez). What started out as a simple nudge might set off a defense mechanism to avoid feelings associated with missing out.

When individuals are already concerned that they are missing out, their distress might be increased by seeing what they are missing out on via social media (Barry and Wong 2952-2953). This distress can cause people to do things to avoid missing out on the fun others are having (Zaske). To avoid being left out, someone might choose to watch a new TV show or movie, check out the newest

*Many social media users experience what is known as the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO).*

restaurant in town, or buy products regardless of their level of interest. Then, individuals might give in to the temptation to post a photo on their own social media to show they are not missing out because they tried the new restaurant or product. Individuals with higher levels of self-compassion and a gentler self-appraisal are likely to experience less distress over other's activities (Barry and Wong 2963). The fascinating aspect of avoiding FOMO is its cyclical nature. The defense mechanisms may have dissipated for the moment, however, individuals who substitute face-to-face connections for social media connections increase their sense of loneliness, which adds to FOMO (Dossey 69).

When a user posts something on social media, the number of "likes" collected on the post increases dopamine, which is a chemical from the brain associated with rewards and pleasure (Sinek 53). Feelings of missing out tend to grow when the number of followers on social media is smaller
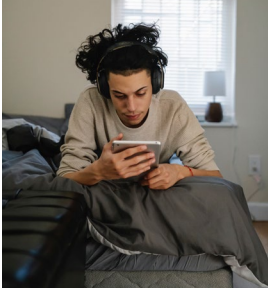


*Avoiding FOMO*

than expected or when the *like* count does not climb as quickly as anticipated after a social media post goes up. The desire to check one's phone on a regular basis to avoid FOMO is an addiction (Edmonds). The 2019 movie *The Social Dilemma* highlighted how the younger generations have difficulty developing their own opinions, largely due to their inability to put smartphones away and live an unfiltered life (Stanley).

FOMO is not fueled only by feelings of unpopularity, it also includes feelings or perceptions that others are having more fun, living better lives, or experiencing more than we are (Scott). FOMO is "the uneasy and sometimes all-consuming feelings that you're missing out—that your peers are doing, or are in possession of, more or something better than you" (Thompson). But FOMO goes beyond an "uneasy" feeling; it can take the form of actual fear, "a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent" (Przybylski et al. 1841). Facebook advertising consultant Carly Stringer describes social influencers as walking, talking FOMO machines!

## Why We Want to Keep Up With the Kardashians

People who follow influencers naturally want to imitate them because they enjoy their content and products (Morgan). When they follow celebrities, seeing their social media posts helps the viewer to feel closer to the celebrity, almost as though the celebrity is communicating directly to the viewer (Caulfield, "COVID Vaccine and Mask Conspiracies").

Christiano Ronaldo, a professional football player for a premiere league club at Manchester United, was the most followed person on Instagram as of March 2021 with 254 million followers (Jankowski). As of November 2021, Ronaldo's followers had grown to 365 million followers. Ronaldo's large fan base is mainly the result of his status as a professional soccer player. In June of 2021 during a press conference, Ronaldo pushed two bottles of Coca-Cola away from him in favor of water, which encouraged viewers to drink water rather than sugary drinks. This single move coincided with Coca-Cola's stock

taking a $4 billion-dollar dive (Garcia). Although Ronaldo did not set out to be an influencer, this example demonstrates the significant power of influence he may have on others.

Remember Average Sam from earlier? Well, Average Sam follows numerous influencers online, sees how many followers they have and wants to live a similar lifestyle, so, what does Sam do? Average Sam follows the influencers' leads on what to buy, what to eat, what content to post on social media, and where to go; Sam posts about their own experiences to eliminate FOMO. By sharing experiences, Sam feels like a part of the social influencer's world.

Twitter was introduced in 2006, with Instagram following in 2010. *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* made its debut in 2007, right in between the two. Author for *CR Fashion Book* Michelle Lee suggests the Kardashians were the prototype for today's social influencers. The Kardashians can still be viewed as a prime example of intentional influencing. A glance at their social media accounts shows their elaborate vacations and fashion sense. Although none of the Kardashian/Jenner sisters have as many followers as Ronaldo on Instagram, Kylie's 334 million and Kim's 308 million support the idea that the family has a heavy influence on others.

*As social media has grown, so has the information shared by social influencers with their viewers.*

Many people today look to social influencers as all-knowing sources when it comes to products they should try, trends to follow, or opinions to adopt as socially acceptable facts. As social media has grown, so has the information shared by social influencers with their viewers. In turn, these viewers immerse themselves in that information, studying, scrutinizing, judging, and formulating opinions based on the content selected by the viewer.

It is natural for people to compare their lives to others, often doing so through a virtual window (Birla). From this virtual window, one quietly observes well-known social influencers. These glimpses into the lives of others validate the idea that identity lies in being part of an elite social circle, which enhances FOMO. While influencers such as the Kardashians send the Average Sams into crisis mode of experiencing FOMO, it might come as a surprise to learn that even famous celebrities, who are often FOMO creators, are not exempt from FOMO. In the image following, four of the five Kardashian/Jenner sisters posted an image together at the

*No exemption from FOMO*

Cheesecake Factory in which Kendall, the sister not in the picture, commented "FOMO" upon seeing the image on Instagram.

While I was writing this article, students in one of my classes discussed trends they wanted to try based exclusively on videos they had seen on TikTok. When asked why they were interested in trying something new they saw on TikTok, the answer was *it just looked like fun*. I was shocked by this real-life example of seeing something featured by an influencer and wanting to try it for no reason other than that it *looks like fun*—and if they don't try it, they are missing out on the fun.

An example closer to home of the impact influencers have on us is my own daughter. Last year for Halloween, she wanted to dress up as Jeremy Camp's late wife, Melissa Camp. Jeremy Camp is a Christian singer/songwriter and someone my daughter sees as a leader and role model. After seeing the movie *I Still Believe* for the first time, my daughter said it changed her life and moved her to strengthen her faith. I happily agreed to assist her in the search for clothes that paralleled various clothing items Melissa had worn in the movie. The outfit was completed with a necklace that looked almost identical to the one Melissa had worn in the movie. I only wish you could see it in the image of her here.



Fast forward one year and my daughter expressed interest in dressing up as someone unfamiliar to me, named Txunamy. When I questioned who this person was, her casual response was "she is a YouTuber," said in such a way that implied I should already know this person. Thanks to social media, I was quickly able to find Txunamy's Instagram page. Txunamy includes *"Kill em with kindness"* at the top of her Instagram page, a message relatable to the values I teach my daughter on the importance of being kind to others. However, her parent-monitored account did not look like an account I would allow my daughter to have. Wearing crop tops, short skirts and posing for that many photos are not things my daughter needs to be engaged in at a young age.
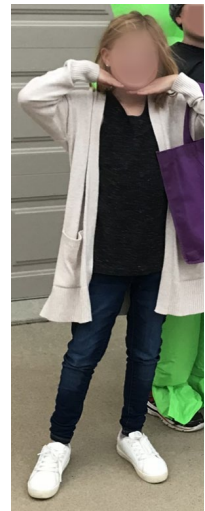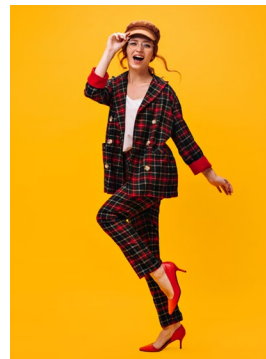
*My daughter dressed as Melissa Camp*

When I asked my daughter why she chose Txunamy, she first said, "I don't know," in contrast to her reasons for choosing to dress as Melissa Camp, who inspired my daughter to want to be a better person in the world. From reading books and watching the movie *I Still Believe*, my daughter was inspired to be like Melissa Camp based on what she had learned about her. My daughter was influenced by Txunamy's YouTube videos touring her bedroom, playing with fidget toys, and driving 300 miles to surprise her best friend on her birthday. She saw a life that looked like fun. Although my daughter could not provide a specific answer as to why she wanted to dress up as Txunamy, it is likely she was influenced by seeing a fun lifestyle and felt as though dressing up as Txunamy would ensure she would not experience FOMO.

Another potential reason my daughter wanted to dress as Txunamy was that she identified with Txunamy's fidget toy video or liked the idea that she, too, has a brother. These possible motivations, and others, were identified by Bradley Hoos, chief growth officer at The Outland Group, an influencer marketing agency, as key reasons people follow social influencers:

1. To conform to cultural norms;

2. The belief that one has power and control over their choices;

3. To gain a personal connection with someone we identify as relatable to us.

The first key reason people follow social influencers is to *conform to cultural norms*. The social influencer culture has become intricately woven into everyday life through daily online platforms. People rely on social media for the latest cultural trends (Mustafa). When one fears they are missing out, they are willing to follow the cultural norms portrayed on social media to avoid that feeling of not being a part of the crowd. An example of this is the 1995 movie *Clueless*. Over 20 years after the movie was released, fashion trends introduced in that movie could still be seen as cultural fashion norms, including mini backpacks, cropped tees, stretch chokers, and



*Fashion style influenced by* Clueless

flannel shirts (Kim). Although the movie was introduced before the social media boom, clearly people have long looked to others as a source of influence on what trends to follow.

Conforming to societal norms to avoid FOMO allows identity and character to be influenced by others, rather than allowing it to be an extension of who and what a person is. "Once our choices become part of our identity, it's easy to find information that confirms our views" (Caulfield, "COVID Vaccine and Mask Conspiracies").

*We long to fit in and have a place in society to avoid FOMO*

People also follow social influencers due to the *belief that one has power and control over their choices*. Those who want to fit in will conform to what appears normal and popular, which contradicts having power and control over their own choices. One study found 23.3% of social media users believed others were trying to affect their opinions via social media (Malinen and Koivula). In comparison, 82% reported they trust social networking sites to influence their purchasing decisions ("20 Surprising Influencer Marketing Statistics")

Finally, people follow social influencers because of their desire to *gain a personal connection to someone they identify as relatable*. As humans, we crave connections and relationships with others. We long to fit in and have a place in society to avoid FOMO. From this yearning, many find ways to justify decisions based on what the influencers are displaying.

When individuals permit influencers to be their definitive source of products to try, trends to follow, and opinions to adopt, they are allowing others (essentially strangers) to exert excessive influence over their identity. In giving influencers this power, people are constructing identities in their influencer's image via a virtual window to prevent FOMO and ignore—or at least suppress—the individuality of their identity.

## Crisis, Character, and Influence

The growing trend of social influencers is no secret to society. Society is growing more tolerant of supporting trends and opinions presented by influencers. Attempts to stay connected on social media has users averaging 2.5 hours per day on social media platforms ("Global Social Media Stats")—browsing influencers' profiles for updates on the latest trends and creating posts to share glimpses of their lives, often fabricated, to ensure the world knows that they are not missing out on life.

When my son was born, he was given a green blanket with a smiling brown monkey positioned in the middle of the fabric. Over the first year or so of his life, this blanket was something he gravitated toward, and it became his

beloved "Blankie." Blankie went on many adventures with him, including car rides, outings, overnights with grandparents, and even made its way to the beach in Florida and the Mall of America. Imagine the images that could be shared if Blankie had a social media account! Blankie has been re-sewn and patched up many times. The monkey that was once vibrantly positioned in the middle of the blanket was transformed, thanks to his babysitter and a sewing machine, into a football, basketball, and now finally, a turtle.



*My son and Blankie*

You might be wondering, what does a blanket have to do with identity and character and, better yet, FOMO? Identity defines who and what a person is that makes them unique and different from others. Character is determined by the moral qualities a person wants to portray. In a way, identity and character are like that blanket. When God creates an individual, their character is like a fresh blanket, ready to be transformed and shaped by the world around them. The values learned at a young age from the surrounding environment allow identity and character to further develop and transform.

A large part of being an adolescent is learning about identity, which shapes one's character. When social media dominates an adolescent experience, the consequences of this domination can be severe (Stanley). As time moves on, identity, and in turn character, are influenced and sculpted by the surrounding environment and experiences. Environment consists of the people adolescents spend time with, even those they silently observe from a social media window. When they make decisions based on FOMO, this contributes to the crisis of allowing their identity and character to conform to what society deems popular and trendy. Experimental psychologist Andrew Przybylski and associates found adolescents who scored high in FOMO were more likely to spend time on social media in times when they should be focused on something more important, such as learning during a university lecture or driving (1847); that second finding is scary for those of us on the road with them!

A person's identity defines who and what they are that makes them unique and different from others. When people become so immersed in the lives of others via social media, they are creating an illusion of a relationship with that celebrity that does not exist. People looking in on the influencer's life feel as though they have a relationship with the influencer, but the relationship is only one-sided (Golbeck). By creating the idea of a relationship that is fake, the person conforms their identity to fit an illusion.

In 2019, psychologist Mike Brooks reported the typical American spent 1,460 hours per year on their smartphone. By the end for 2021, the average amount of time a user spends online grew to 6 hours and 58 minutes. Per day! Datareportal indicated that, of all the time people spend on their devices each day, 2 hours and 27 minutes are dedicated to

*A person's identity defines who and what they are that makes them unique.*

social media ("Global Social Media Stats"). That is a lot of time spent daily on living out (and forming) one's identity and character through a filter! While some of the time on social media may be spent sharing one's own posts or connecting with family and friends, most of that time is more likely spent scrolling through news feeds. News feeds are regularly filled with content posted by influencers and ads, often sponsored by businesses and organizations that are not even being followed by the user. This contributes to the crisis of identity and character; the more time they spend on social media, the more people are likely to be impacted by social influencers, even by those influencers they are not actively interested in.

Character shaping and influence can happen right through the screen. Fyre Festival of 2017 is an example of how people were influenced to conform their identity and character to fit in with the trends of the time. 63 of the most well-known influencers in the world at the time promoted the event on their social media accounts (Kubbernus). The hype of this event spread like wildfire once influencers became involved. People were willing to pay up to $100,000 for a ticket to this private island event that was said to include all you can eat and drink, private jets, extravagant villas, and parties with celebrities.

The Netflix documentary, *FYRE: The Greatest Party that Never Happened*, exposed the absence of an infrastructure for successful implementation of this event, along with a lack of staff, shelter, and food needed to

accommodate the number of tickets sold. People had trusted social influencers' integrity enough to buy tickets without checking the credibility of this event, though it was clearly too good to be true. Attendees put logical thinking aside and apparently focused on how the event would impact their identify and sense of belonging.

Making choices based on what we perceive as popular leads us to conform to societal norms, whether helpful or harmful, rather than embracing our individuality or choosing what is right and good. This is not the best way forward.



*Fyre Festival's disappointing fare*

## A Way Forward

When someone follows an influencer, their choices and decisions are affected by the influencer and those choices become part of their identity (Caulfield, "COVID Vaccine and Mask Conspiracies"). But "God doesn't Photoshop the before picture or use a filter to make it look glamorous and Instagram-worthy. He is in the business of transforming our heart and our character through the waiting" (Narjala). With social influencers and FOMO likely here for the long haul, there are small adjustments people can make to shift their focus away from looking to influencers to avoid FOMO and to individual identity and character:

1.  Consider the source of information;

2.  Monitor screen time;

3.  Think of one's identity on the other side of the social media filter.

The first adjustment to shift focus from social influencers to one's own identity and character is to *consider the source of information*. People can start by realizing the stories shared on social media by influencers are not always the real story (Thompson). The photo or video we are watching might have taken 10 attempts before the final product was ready to post. People often look to social influencers as the all-knowing source when it comes to products to try, places to visit, or trends to follow. Before buying the product, booking the flight, or jumping on the bandwagon to follow a

new trend, a person can do their own research. This research can include investigating products, reading reviews, or spending time on a company's website to learn more about their values and beliefs.

People can read and learn about influencers they feel a connection to and explore the influencer's values and beliefs to determine if they align with their own values and beliefs. If a person finds an influencer's values do align with their own, there is little harm in following the influencer's lead, within reason. The important point is to stay true to your own identity and moral compass, rather than becoming a generic version of the influencer.

Second, *monitor screen time*. Newer smartphones and electronics can track the number of minutes spent on the device along with the amount of time spent on each app on the device. In the book *The Happiness Advantage,* Shawn Achor points out that if people set rules when trying to change a habit, they are less likely to succumb in the moment when tempted to stray from the decided-upon changes (168). An alarm could be set for a certain number of minutes. Once the alarm goes off, it is important to put the device down and move on to something else to reinforce the change.

Another way to monitor screen time is to take social media breaks. The length of the break can vary: perhaps a day, a week, or even a month or longer. During that time, users should not allow themselves to check their social media accounts in any capacity. Instead, they can spend the time they would have spent on social media engaging in conversations with family and friends, reading a book, or taking time to enjoy nature by adding more exercise into their day. As author and law professor Timothy Caulfield states, "any effort to make our days less fragmented, frantic, and stress-reducing is worth considering" (*Your Day*, 232). By taking time away from social media to have conversations with others, or taking time to oneself, one's identity and character can be influenced by loved ones and oneself rather than by social media influencers.

> *One's identity and character can be influenced by loved ones and oneself rather than by social media influencers.*

The third adjustment I recommend is to *think of one's identity on the other side of the social media filter*. The more a person bases their self-worth on their fundamental inner identity, the less pressure they place on external circumstances and other people (Oberg). Replacing negative thoughts about missing out on something with positive thoughts helps to reframe one's

thinking to focus on the present (Thompson). When did you last spend time by yourself, reflecting on your day, a recent choice you made, or an upcoming decision? What about the last time you wrote in a journal about whatever thoughts were on your mind? Or took time to truly pray or write down three things you are grateful for each morning? Taking time to yourself will allow you to reflect on your own identity and character.

These three adjustments are small steps. As the saying commonly attributed to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. goes, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." While it may not be clear what life will be like on the top of the staircase where they have separated themselves from the influencer and FOMO, taking the first step is the way to begin the climb.

## Final Thoughts

Our identity and character make us who we are. Subconsciously and consciously, our identity and character are at the core of every thought, action, and word we speak. Comparing our imperfections to the outside packaging of others is dangerous (TerKeurst 141). If we allow influencers on social media to consume our decisions and opinions to avoid FOMO, our minds will be focused on someone else's outside packaging, their identity and character and not ours. If we decide to focus first on formulating our own thoughts and opinions, we are putting our identity and character before FOMO, which allows us to have our individuality, values, and character at the heart of our identity.

I don't know about you, but I don't want others to remember me as someone who conformed to the influences of others. I want others to remember me as someone who was true to myself, someone who did not try to Keep Up with the Kardashians, but rather someone who made them want to be a better version of themselves.

*Molly Hein is an Assistant Professor of Business at University of Dubuque. She has an EdD in Educational Leadership from University of Phoenix, an MS in Sport Management from Western Illinois University, and a BA in Physical Education from Loras College. Although her career path led several ways at first, her passion has always been in education. Molly is grateful her path led to her current role at University of Dubuque.*

Photo credit p. 67: Eren Li, pexels.com
Photo credit p. 69: Molly Hein
Photo credit p. 72: Molly Hein

## Works Cited

"20 Surprising Influencer Marketing Statistics." *Digital Marketing Institute*, 19 Oct. 2021, https://digitalmarketinginstitute.com/blog/20-influencer-marketing-statistics-that-will-surprise-you.

Achor, Shawn. *The Happiness Advantage: How a Positive Brain Fuels Success in Work and Life*. Currency, 2010.

Alutaybi, Aarif., et. al "Combating Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) on Social Media: The FoMO-R Method.*" Environmental Research and Public Health,* vol.17, no. 17, Aug. 2020, pp.6128. *MDPI*, https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/17/17/6128/htm#B2-ijerph-17-06128.

Auschwitz Memorial [@AuschwitzMuseum]. "When you come to @ AuschwitzMuseum remember you are at the site where over 1 million people were killed. . . ." *Twitter*, 20 Mar. 2019, https://twitter.com/auschwitzmuseum/status/1108337507660451841?lang=hi.

Barry, Christopher T., and Megan Y. Wong. "Fear of Missing Out (FoMO): A Generational Phenomenon or an Individual Difference?" *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, vol. 37, no. 12, Dec. 2020, pp. 2952–2966.

Beck, Julie. "People Want Power because They Want Autonomy." *The Atlantic*, 22 Mar. 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2016/03/people-want-power-because-they-want-autonomy/474669/.

Birla, Neerja. "How FOMO is Affecting Your Mental Health, and Needs to be Addressed." *The Economics Times,* 19 Jan. 2018, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/between-the-lines/fomo/articleshow/62550811.cms.

Brooks, Mike. "The 'Vegas Effect' of ours Screens."*Psychology Today*, 4 Jan. 2019, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/tech-happy-life/201901/the-vegas-effect-our-screens.

Caulfield, Timothy. "COVID Vaccine and Mask Conspiracies Succeed When They Appeal to Identity and Ideology." *NBCNews,* 18 Dec. 2020, https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/covid-vaccine-mask-conspiracies-succeed-when-they-appeal-identity-ideology-ncna1251761.

---. *Your Day, Your Way: The Fact and Fiction Behind Your Daily Decisions.* Running Press, 2020.

Deutsch, Morton, and Harold Gerard, 1955. "A Study of Normative and Informational Social Influences upon Individual Judgment." *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, vol. 51, no. 3, 1955, p. 629-636, https://doi.org/10.1037/h0046408

"Digital 2022: Global Overview Report." *Datareportal*, 25 Jan. 2022, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-global-overview-report.

Dominguez, Liz. "The Surprising Reason We Crave Popularity." *RisMedia*, 2 Aug. 2018, https://www.rismedia.com/2018/08/02/surprising-reason-crave-popularity/.

Dossey, Larry. "FOMO, Digital Dementia, and Our Dangerous Experiment." *Explore,* vol. 10, no. 2, 2014, pp. 69-73.

Edmonds, Rhys. "Anxiety, Loneliness, and Fear of Missing Out: The Impact of Social Media on Young People's Mental Health." https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/blogs/anxiety-loneliness-and-fear-missing-out-impact-social-media-young-peoples-mental-health. Accessed 5 May 2022.

@explorerssaurus_. Photo of affectionate couple hanging out of train as it crosses a bridge in Sri Lanka. *Instagram*, 28 Dec. 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/B6n-So2JSmQ/.

*Fyre: The Greatest Party that Never Happened.* Directed by Chris Smith, Netflix/Jerry Media, 18 Jan. 2019.

Garcia, Adriana. "Cristiano Ronaldo Snub Sees Coca-Cola Market Value Fall by $4bn." *ESPN,* 16 Jun. 2021, https://www.espn.com/soccer/portugal-por/story/4410619/cristiano-ronaldo-snub-sees-coca-cola-share-price-fall-by-$4bn.

Golbeck, Jennifer. "You're Not Really Friends with that Internet Celebrity." *Psychology Today,* 28 Jul. 2016, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/your-online-secrets/201607/youre-not-really-friends-internet-celebrity.

"Global Social Media Stats." *Datareportal,* https://datareportal.com/social-media-users. Accessed 8 Dec. 2021.

Hoos, Bradley. "The Psychology of Influencer Marketing." *Forbes,* 22 Aug. 2019, https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2019/08/22/the-psychology-of-influencer-marketing/?sh=7c9f8c33e1be.

*I Still Believe*. Directed by Andrew Erwin and Jon Erwin, Kingdom Story Company, 2020.

Jankowski, Paul. "Not All Influencers Are Celebrities. . . . Not All Celebrities Are Influencers, Part 2." *Forbes*, 5 Mar. 2021, https://www.forbes.com/sites/pauljankowski/2021/03/05/not-all-influencers-are-celebritiesnot-all-celebrities-are-influencers-part-2/?sh=3c66b4101f35.

@kourtneykardash. Photo of four Kardashian/Jenner sisters. *Instagram*, 13 Mar. 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/Bu8AEmXnlvK/?hl=en.

Kim, Monica. "The *Clueless* Effect: How One Cult '90s Movie Made a Lasting Impact on Fashion." *Vogue*, 17 Jun. 2015, https://www.vogue.com/article/clueless-cult-movie-fashion-impact.

Kirwan, Dennis. "Are Social Media Influencers Worth the Investment?" *Forbes*, 21 Aug. 2018, https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2018/08/21/are-social-media-influencers-worth-the-investment/?sh=4b548d7af452.

Kubbernus, Chris. "28 Epic Influencer Fails of All Time." *Kubbco*, 6 Nov. 2020, https://www.kubbco.com/epic-influencer-marketing-fails-of-all-time/.

Malinen, Sanna, and Aki Koivula. "Influencers and Targets on Social Media: Investigating the Impact of Network Homogeneity and Group Identification on Online Influence." *First Monday,* vol. 25, no. 4-6, 25 Mar. 2020. https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/10453/9412.

Moreno, Angeles, et al. "Does Social Media Usage Matter? An Analysis of Online Practices and Digital Media Perceptions of Communication Practitioners in Europe." *Public Relations Review,* vol. 41 no. 2, 2015, pp. 242-253.

Morgan, Alanna. "Seeking Sales in New Channels: The Effectiveness of Influencer Marketing." *Pop Culture Intersections,* vol. 49, 2 Sept. 2020, https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/engl_176/49/?utm_source=scholarcommons.scu.edu%2Fengl_176%2F49&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages.

Mustafa, Mahrukh. "Anthropology: The Impact of Social Media Influencer Culture on Human Behavior." *YOAIRBlog,* 28 Apr 21, https://www.yoair.com/blog/anthropology-the-impact-of-social-media-influencer-culture-on-human-behavior/.

Narjala, Susan. "While You Wait." *You Version Bible App.* Accessed 1 Dec. 2021.

Oberg, John. "Being vs. Doing." *Daily Jo*, https://johnoberg.com/being-vs-doing/. Accessed 11 Nov. 2021.

Przybylski, Andrew K., et al. "Motivational, Emotional, and Behavioral Correlates of Fear of Missing Out." *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2013, pp. 1841–1848.

Scipioni, Jade. "Here's How Many Social Media Followers You Need to Make $100,000." *CNBC*, 30 Apr. 2021, https://www.cnbc.com/2021/04/30/how-much-money-you-can-make-off-social-media-following-calculator.html.

Scott, Elizabeth. "How to Deal with FOMO in Your Life: The Origin of FOMO and How It Affects Our Health." *Verywell Mind*, 25 Apr. 2021, https://www.verywellmind.com/how-to-cope-with-fomo-4174664.

Sijm, Manon Lisa, et al. "Using a Temporal-Causal Network Model for Computational Analysis of the Effect of Social Media Influencers on the Worldwide Interest in Veganism." *Fourth International Congress on Information and Communication Technology,* vol. 2, edited by Yang, Xin-She, et al., Springer, 2020, pp. 129-140.

Sinek, Simon. *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't.* Portfolio/Penguin, 2014.

*The Social Dilemma*. Directed by Jeff Orlowski, Netflix/Exposure Labs, 26 Jan. 2020.

Stanley, Paige. "Social Media Is a Drug: The Social Dilemma Explains the World of AI and Its Impact on Gen Z." *The Seattle Prep Panther*, 8 Feb. 21, https://seappreppanther.org/6816/entertainment/social-media-is-a-drug-the-social-dilemma-explains-the-world-of-ai-and-its-impact-on-gen-z/.

Stringer, Carly. "How to Create FOMO on Social Media." *LinkedIn.* 10 Apr. 2019, https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-create-fomo-social-media-carly-stringer.

TerKeurst, Lysa. *Embraced: 100 Devotionals to Know God is Holding you Close*. Thomas Nelson, 2018.

Thaler, Richard, and Cass Sunstein. *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness.* Penguin Books, 2009.

Thompson, Lauren. "FOMO: It's Your Life You're Missing Out on." *Science Daily.* 30 Mar. 2016, https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2016/03/160330135623.htm.

Tr3vor.sol [@TrevorDeHaas]. "The dinner that @fyrefestival promised us was catered by Steven Starr is literally bread, cheese, and salad with dressing." Twitter, 27 Apr. 2017, https://twitter.com/trevordehaas/status/857776562615308288?lang=en.

Zaske, Sara. "Fear of Missing Out Affects People of All Ages." *Washington State University Insider,* 26 Aug. 2020, https://news.wsu.edu/press-release/2020/08/26/fear-missing-impacts-people-ages/.

# Surviving a Crisis by Not Being an Idiot

Mark A. E. Williams

A bit of trivia: the ancient Greek word for *individual* is *idiōtēs*—an *idiot.* The *idiot* is the person who thinks alone, without benefiting from the wisdom and experience of their community and its history. But character is a gift from our community. Our souls are crafted and shaped by those around us. If we cut ourselves off from some healthy, mature community, then we will never develop the sort of character that leads to a flourishing human life.

The *idiot* is the one who arrogantly believes they don't need the rest of us to think clearly. In the end, this means the *idiot* will also *act* alone. They will *speak* from that same self-centered isolation. They have not embraced and understood their community, so they generally cannot offer anything the rest of the community finds valuable. Isolated, the *idiot* usually weighs the costs and benefits of any situation only from the perspective of self-interest.[1]

*The idiot who thinks alone*

*The idiot is the person who thinks alone, without benefiting from the wisdom and experience of their community and its history.*

It takes very little imagination to recognize how an *idiot* is unhelpful in a time of crisis. When a crisis emerges, it requires us to see the situation, to make specific judgments, and to take some type of action. But we carry in us the wisdom to face a crisis only if we have already managed to avoid *idiocy,* that act of believing we don't need the community. We do. I want to suggest that the way we prepare to face crisis is to shed our constructed individualism and learn—

now, before the crisis becomes too intense—from mature communities that know how to teach souls both to be good and to do good.

We must not, I believe, overvalue our originality or the sort of flashy individualism that is so commonly (and shallowly) admired. Perhaps, instead of being strikingly *original* and *individual,* the character necessary for facing a crisis will have other facets. Perhaps I will best form the character necessary for facing crisis by trying to imitate the way others, wiser and better than myself, have weathered challenges. Plato, by the way, teaches this very thing: how important it is to shed our *idiocy* and learn from a reservoir of better souls *before* we are faced with a crisis.[2]



*Unique and valuable*

Of course, this shedding of *idiotic* originality does not cut anyone off from being unique and valuable. We are both, and remembering our inherent value is essential to a flourishing life.[3] To believe or pretend that I am not valuable means I am committing the opposite error of the idiot. If I say I am not valuable or unique, it reduces me to a part in a machine: a replaceable gear, some mass-produced cosmic cog. Such a view denies that God specifically *intended me*. The Wise and the Good do not put up with that sort of silliness.

Any life might find itself in a real mess or stuck in a small place or burdened with dull tasks. But a life is not the mess it finds itself in. (It is good to remember this point when we find ourselves in a crisis!) And every life, even in the middle of the messiest circumstances and seemingly smallest chores, is meaningful and purposed. There are no replaceable lives. There are no pointless lives.

This is something Aquinas teaches us (over and over!). So does C. S. Lewis, and John Henry Newman, and Dietrich Bonhoffer, and John Paul II, and Ephrem the Syrian, and Thomas à Kempis, and Luigi Santucci, and lots and lots of other folks in the distant and not so distant past.[4]

There is, after all, nothing new under the sun. But that is good news. It means the crises of the present moment require no idiotic originality, no undiscovered ideas, no experimental "new kind" of wisdom. But a crisis does require us to *see the moment,* and to *make judgments,* and to *act*. That is the nature of a crisis.

Like *idiot,* the word *crisis* comes from a Greek term, *krisis.* A *krisis* is a judgment offered because the circumstances demand it.[5] The word sometimes meant the verdict of a trial, for example, or the accusation that led to the trial. In short, a crisis is a situation where indifference, hesitation, or neutrality are no longer options. Judgments and actions are required. We are in the jury of this specific moment, and we *must* take some stand. In a crisis, even remaining silent casts a vote.[6]

Crisis is a moment when the instincts of our character kick in. Reflection and consideration may help to shape, to teach, to inform our moral instincts in days that are calmer and quieter. And people who are not experiencing my present crisis (especially if that crisis goes on for some time) may be able to reflect on the situation and offer me guidance as my circumstances continue to develop and unfold.

All of our authors in this issue are serving that role. They have experience with crises, they have studied crises, and they have gained insights that are worth listening to. And if we listen, we will strengthen our own character and become better equipped to do good, act wisely, and stand beautifully (not savagely) for what is right in that moment when a crisis calls us to action.

*Crisis is a moment when the instincts of our character kick in.*

That call to action will probably not offer us the benefit of much (or any!) reflection and consideration. Because, when a crisis comes, reflection and consideration are not what the crisis usually calls for. The *situation* makes that clear: it is too late for that sort of work. Crisis is the moment when we find out whether we have *already* done the work of character-building well. Or less well.

I have suggested that being in a crisis means we have to *see* the moment, make a *judgment*, and *act*, all within circumstances that often give us little luxury for extended reflection. Of course, if we are going to handle a crisis well, we need more than seeing, judging, and acting.

We need

- to see the moment—*clearly;*
- to make judgments—*wisely;* and
- to act—*reasonably and responsibly*.

This is where we can benefit from the guidance of our present authors. Each of them is able to offer us some real lessons on accomplishing these tasks. The lessons they offer will help us to hone our own character if we allow them to inform us—to shape our hearts and minds. These lessons will prepare us for the moment when a crisis makes its demands on us, either in an ongoing, unfolding, unpredictable season of our life, or in an instant.

## *A Sip of Community*[7]

Molly Hein pulls no punches in her presentation of the contemporary crisis of identity that is built into the social media experience. If we have character, that means we have taken the time to let our souls be formed and shaped by sources that have a proven track record of helping people build rich, full lives.[8]

Flourishing lives are deeply aware of their own worth, and that means they are much less likely to experience a craving for constant approval or to need the self-defenses that are built out of arrogance. But we live these days in a social media world that is consciously designed to create an addiction to insecurity.

*We long for connection and community.*

Hein *sees clearly*, and she points out our "sheep without a shepherd" moment where we long for connection and community. But this very longing—good and desirable in itself—leads to crisis when the desire for community is derailed and redefined as FOMO and celebrity worship.

In the place of communities capable of depth and character-formation, we are left with "influencers" and a perilous, vague, electronic habit that ties our sense of worth to a shallow participation in a shallow mirage of meaning. Nothing here will quench our thirst, but we are addicts and keep coming back, spending the wealth of our souls on that which does not satisfy.

Hein leads us to confront the fact that, without the guidance of a rich and deep community, we are probably admiring the wrong things and posing the wrong questions. We—and especially the young—keep being wowed by influencers and asking, "Do I want to be like this person?" and the answer is, "Of course!" Who would not want to be attractive, wealthy, and popular? But maybe the better questions are these: "How do I learn to want things

that are really worth wanting? How do I learn what is worthy of a heart as priceless as mine?"

The answer is to drink long and deeply from the depth and wisdom of communities that have a long-established and proven track record for helping people make good decisions and build flourishing lives in many different circumstances and places. Communities of worship frequently provide such guidance, despite the failings of individual, *idiotic,* members and leaders. Recognizing the power of these communities and embracing their teachings and guidance does not mean we trust them blindly or ignore their failures.[9]

But when they are true to their own sense of revelation, long-established traditions of worship usually reach across time and cultures and teach us to anchor our character in proper perspectives, real worth, and appropriate values. Communities of worship teach us how to flourish, how to fight lovingly for what is just, how to become whole ourselves. Each of our authors suggest, in some way, that the key



*Living and flourishing together*

to weathering a crisis is to seek out communities that teach us the wisdom to know what is right, inspire us with the courage to choose it, and provide us with the strength to do it.[10] Once we are whole in ourselves and living a flourishing human life—or at least moving in that direction!—we are grounded in what is more real, and we are less likely to be taken in by the shallow appeal of mirages.

## Bold Humility

Being anchored to the Things That Really Matter instead of mirages and illusions brings depth and confidence to our lives. But it also brings an equally bold measure of humility. If we do not usually think of humility and bold confidence as partners, we should think again and more clearly. Both Michelle Grace and Ken Turner highlight how these two virtues complement one another. To see how, let's start with a story. We'll go to the Greeks again!

A friend of Socrates asked the Oracle at Delphi, "Who is the wisest person in Greece?" The Oracle said Socrates was the wisest. When he heard this,

Socrates was disturbed and withdrew for a while before announcing that he understood. "I was puzzled at first," he said, "because I know the gods cannot lie, but I also know that I am not wise."

So, how did Socrates solve this crisis in his faith? "Now I understand," he said, "that the wisest person is the one who knows how little they understand." When we are confident of who we are but also aware of how little we know, we can (without being naïve!) happily, casually, comfortably seek the guidance of others, better than ourselves. Because he knew who he was and also knew how little he knew, Socrates (a middle-class working man, a stonemason) was wiser than all the bigshots in Athens.

Turner takes up the issue of science and provides us with several perspectives that give us the opportunity to recognize our own limits in knowledge and understanding. He points out how these moments leaven a community in crisis. Community requires us to lean on each other's strengths, and to allow others to lead where we cannot. And that means knowing our own strengths but also our own limits. Science is a perfect example of bold humility.

Turner notes that science has a power that is both a blessing and a challenge. I am married to a scientist—a very good one—and she is quick to note that science is an incredibly powerful way to understand *how things work.* But science is, she also notes, a weakling in understanding *moral demands,* or *the meaning of life,* or *why things happen.* Science has something powerful to offer. But that power is limited to describing and explaining how material stuff works. When we come to morals and meaning, true science sits humbly in the presence of poets, artists, and theologians.

*"The wisest person is the one who knows how little they understand."*

Don't be fooled! Those scientific explanations of material stuff are often exactly what we need. Knowing how things in nature work is absolutely amazing. Scientists seek exactly the same results every time they do an experiment. Where scientists see something unexpected, they have to go back to the drawing board and figure out what they missed. As Turner reminds us, that process can take time and often moves two steps forward and one step back on its way to knowing how material things work. But the careful method of science is almost unimaginably powerful.

Science can tell me that if I put the same acidic fertilizer on my blueberries and my raspberries, the raspberries will die. That is, science knows what will happen *in the future* if I do or fail to do certain things. That is powerful stuff. We like that. We love science. Science is why we have broken the famine cycle that dominated our history for millennia.[11] Science is why we can give people three- or four-days' warning before a hurricane hits their coast. Science is why my phone can find a good sushi place when I am in a new city. Medical science is why many of us are still alive. Science is great!
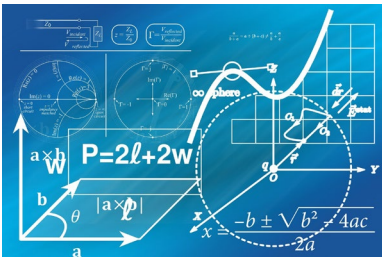


*Scientific explanations of material stuff*

But I am not a scientist. My Beloved, that scientist-spouse of mine, understands things I will never comprehend. She knows that certain things happen inside an atom, how those things happen, and what all this tells us about stars and time and space. I understand none of it. I never will. When the questions are about how material nature works, those of us who are not scientists need, Turner reminds us, to have the boldness to see ourselves clearly and the humility to step aside and to wait for the blessings that scientists alone are able to offer our community. Those of us who have not earned scientific expertise need to offer other blessings in those moments—blessings appropriate to our own gifts and abilities.

With bold humility, we *act responsibly.* We acknowledge both our own worth and our own limits. We defer to those who have gifts we lack. We listen to those who have earned expertise about things we cannot understand. Our limits do not mean we are not valuable. They mean our neighbors are valuable too, and so we need each other.

Michelle Grace's consideration of the slow-burn crisis of a toxic environment shows that same measure of boldness and humility. Grace gives us a tour of toxic organizations and points out the way these environments create a cauldron of chaos and confusion. And, at least in some sorts of toxic organizations, her advice is blunt: get out. Sometimes we have to survey the situation and realize that fixing this mess is simply beyond our ability or authority. Remaining is harmful to us; the toxic organization tries to push us away from, not toward, a flourishing life. Being bold enough to simply gather your dignity and walk away is a powerful—and correct—move, very often. We should hold our heads high, Grace reminds us, and find a place where our inner values and the organization's values line up.

Where we find ourselves in leadership positions, however, we may want to take on the even bolder task of detoxing the organizational environment. The recommendation for doing this is a method that mirrors the sort of interior formation necessary for character building in human beings. The goal is to develop a consistent "organizational culture"—the equivalent of a person's *character*—built around core beliefs, convictions, and priorities.

Leaders can help weaken toxic culture and strengthen healthy organizational culture by directing and influencing the values and behaviors that define an organization. This, of course, "takes time, effort, reinforcement, and support" (55). Grace's description here reminds us of the way science works, as in Turner's piece: two steps forward, one step back. In other words, most good things are going to take a lot of effort and a lot of time and a lot of patience and a lot of bold humility.

*Our limits do not mean we are not valuable. They mean our neighbors are valuable too, and so we need each other.*

The boldness of setting out to correct a toxic culture—from within as a leader or as a whistleblower—is naturally accompanied by a humility that takes the long view and recognizes that there will be sacrifices and there will be difficulties that will demand we lean on other's expertise. Grace observes that the head of Volkswagen replaced a toxic culture in the organization with a healthy culture, but he "certainly did not achieve this on his own. He had a team" that helped turn the tide. It took, she noted, "years of work" (55). Those years of bold change were rooted in a humility that recognized and respected what others had to offer.

## A Meaningful Mess

Of course, just because someone has something to offer, it doesn't mean we like them, or that we trust them, or that they can be trusted. And this raises the question of how to build community in a time of suspicion and within a country full of division. Josh Thomas is committed to bold humility: a central part of addressing our present problems is "admitting we don't know everything" (21), he acknowledges. But Thomas also raises another tension at the core of our present troubles. He notes that in the broader culture, "people interpret words differently" (20).

This means terms like *freedom* or *justice* or *moral* may imply very different things to different groups. These different understandings are often at the heart of our cultural divisions. One group rallies around one definition of some *Good*, like *justice*. Another group champions a different meaning. A third group forwards yet another interpretation of the word. How do we figure out which is the *correct interpretation?*

Bold humility would suggest this is, perhaps, the wrong question. Bold humility combines two perspectives at once. First, we can say with boldness and confidence that some definitions of *justice* are simply incorrect. Some things are *unjust, immoral, wrong*. Taking such a stand is bold and principled and should be celebrated. The bold claim that some actions (and even some attitudes) are immoral is much better than the mealy-mouthed absurdity that says anything can be right in certain contexts.

No. There are no circumstances in which rape is right. There are no situations in which a child should be beaten to blood. If any culture believes some human lives are worth less because of the color of their skin, the culture is wrong on that point. Period.

But second, bold humility is quick to recognize that my own understandings are not as complete as they could be. I know how little I know. My great-great-grandparents probably accepted the enslavement of African people as a good and natural thing. They were wrong and did not see their error. No doubt there are wrongs going on around us today that we do not see clearly.

Bold humility seeks out instruction on what *I* have not seen clearly, what *I* have not judged wisely, what *I* have not done rightly. I do this to shed my *idiocy*. What bold humility *does* see clearly is this: when we are on different sides of some divisive issue, if the goal is to crush the opposition, then we have broken our communion.[12] But if the goal is

*Bold humility in community*

understanding more deeply an actual *Good* that neither of us can claim to understand fully, then we are still a community even in our disagreement. We are still a community because you and I are both struggling toward the same thing: a real, unchanging *Good* that both of us love and neither of us understands completely.

Suddenly, our disagreements are a gift to both of us. You claim to see something about *justice* that I do not see. Show me what I have missed. I will challenge you and question you, and you will, perhaps, learn to see your own position more clearly, correct your perspective just a bit, love this *Good* more deeply. And I will have learned to look at *justice* from a slightly new angle. And, of course, I can do the same for you. I will explain to you what I understand about *justice*. You will challenge me. I will correct my perspective, clarify my position, love the same *justice* you love more deeply than I did before. We may still disagree. But we will still be in communion. Communities are composed of those who love the same thing even when looking at different aspects of it (Augustine 19:24).

If we choose only *boldness*, we will be left with only power and savage domination as the definition of our relationships (Augustine 19:14). If we choose only a milksop timid *humility*, we become the victims of influencers, advertisers, liars and other *idiots.* But if you and I both choose *bold humility* as the currency of our disagreements, then abortion, or critical race theory, or the environment, or the definition of gender, or the unequal distribution of wealth, or national health care, or any of a dozen other crises will not unmake our community. Instead, these disagreements will become an invitation to see more clearly, to love more deeply, and to enact more responsibly those things we both say we desire: justice, goodness, beauty, truth.[13]

Each of us begins by knowing we don't know everything. We need to be in community with each other. Thomas calls us, through bold humility, to embrace practical steps needed to move ahead. Chief among these is the need to "build strong communities" that emphasize caring pragmatically for others. This is foundational.

And none of this is easy. Our writers in this issue move us through a series of specific and general reflections on *crisis.* They invite us to think more carefully than we have before and to slip past the clichés and easy answers we want to hear in these difficult times. If we are willing to stretch ourselves and to continue this conversation out in the spaces past our easy answers, then these essays have done us all a great service.

*You and I are both struggling toward the same thing: a real, unchanging* Good *that both of us love and neither of us understands completely.*

*Mark A. E. Williams is a professor of rhetoric at California State University, Sacramento. He is the author of* Well-behaved Words: The Art of Learning Exactly what you want to Say and Teaching your Words to Say Exactly that*, as well as "Saint Socrates, Pray for Us: Rhetoric and the Physics of Being Human" in* Rhetoric in the Twenty-first Century*, and "From Here to Eternity: The Scope of Misreading Plato's Religion" in* Communication and the Global Landscape of Faith*, among others. He lives outside San Francisco with his family, and in his spare time he binds books by hand and writes noticeably mediocre poetry and fiction.*

Photo credit p. 81: "Arrogant" by kues1, www.freepik.com
Photo credit p. 82: "Down" by freepik, www.freepik.com
Photo credit p. 85: RODNAE Productions, www.pexels.com
Image credit p. 87: "Geometry" by Gerd Altmann, www.pixabay.com
Photo credit p. 89: "Coffee Friends" by yanalya, www.freepik.com

## Notes

[1] Perhaps the most perfect example of an *idiōtēs* that has ever existed is the contemporary narcissist, found at the center of so much toxic office politics and so many toxic family relationships these days!

[2] Plato talks about this in the parable of Er, in Book 9 of the *Republic.* That story emphasizes how important it is to intensely listen to divine wisdom and allow that wisdom to shape the soul before any *individual* dares to speak or to choose. The parable also makes the point that you can place yourself in the presence of the Divine Things without paying very much serious attention to them, and this is perilous. An *idiot* will miss the point of the Divine Things completely. The *idiot* comes to believe that their own wants and desires are like God's wants and desires. Approaching the Divine World without the wisdom that comes from long, disciplined training at the hands of a good community is something Plato considers one of the most dangerous things we can do. He makes similar points in the first half of his "dialogue" (or "brief play") called *Phaedrus.*

[3] Today, we will often use the term *individuality* or *individual identity* to emphasize exactly this sort of *unique worth*. We see that use in Molly Hein's piece on the identity crisis inspired by today's social media platforms. In the past, English often used the phrase, "the Good Life," to reference this idea of flourishing and personal worth.

[4] It is difficult to know where to begin or end the citations. See, for example, Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Part I, questions 75-102; or John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus,* ¶11; or C. S. Lewis, *A Horse and His Boy*; or Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ,* esp. Book III, ch. xxii.3; or Luigi Santucci, *Meeting Jesus;* or Frederick

Beuchner, *Godric*; or Holly Ordway, *Not God's Type*; or G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man,* to name just a few Christians whose writings point to the unique value and worth of every human life.

[5] An academic exploration of this idea will lead to comparing the terms *krisis* and *kairos.* Where *krisis* means a specific judgment, *kairos* means an opportune moment, a time where significant consequences hang in the balance. Read more at François Hartog, "Chronos, Kairos, and Krisis: The Genesis of Western Time," in *History & Theory*. There are a number of responses to Hertog in that same journal.

[6] I do not mean to say that silence is *wrong.* It may be, but not necessarily. Silence may very well offer support to the wisest of the options present, as when a single person stands resolutely silent and refuses to offer the Nazi salute. But in a crisis, silence takes sides. Any silence inevitably endorses one course of action above others. It is also important to note that if one can simply keep a low profile without causing crisis or contributing to it, that is often what the Wise counsel. The early church ruled that a Christian believer who was put to death because they invited conflict by, for example, choosing to publicly desecrate an altar of the Roman gods, was not a martyr. They were an *idiot*: a person of arrogance who failed to understand and respond with peaceful charity to the context and communities they were a part of, Christian *and* Roman. On the other hand, some Christians did all that could be reasonably expected in order to avoid confrontation and conflict, but they were still hauled up before the Roman judges. These Christians were expected to state their faith charitably, but without reservation or compromise, and to accept the consequences of that faith. These were the martyrs. For more on the ideas of martyrdom early in church history, see Kenneth Harl, *The Fall of the Pagans and the Origins of Medieval Christianity: Course Guidebook.* See notes on Lecture 8 and especially Lecture 13.

[7] "Sip of Community" is a line from a Bruce Cockburn song, "Café Society," on the album *Bone on Bone*. In the song, Cockburn is examining the shallow imitation of community often found in urban coffee shops. Real community allows one to drink deeply from the well of meaning. Imitation community only allows shallow sips of sound-bites and clichés.

[8] *Ēthos,* or *reliable authority*, is a quality that describes a community of wisdom with a long, proven track record of helping human beings make good choices and live flourishing lives. It is one of the three sources for learning how to choose wisely, Aristotle tells us. The other two are clear thinking and properly trained emotions. Aristotle famously discusses these three sources for creating faith (or wise confidence) in Book 1 of his work *Rhetoric,* though these ideas also come up in his work on ethics and logic.

[9] Just as the worth of a life is not diminished by the circumstances it finds itself in, the value of a faith community is not necessarily diminished by the failings of its members. Those who wish to be "faithful to their faith" must look past the members to the core of a faith community's vision, tradition, and teaching. These

are what must be weighed in order to see if the community has *ēthos*.

[10] This is paraphrased from one prayer in the evening office of my own religious tradition: "Father of Lights: every good and perfect gift comes from you, but our hearts are deceitful. In your grace, grant us the wisdom to know the right, the courage to choose it, and the strength to do it; through the wounds of your victorious Son who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, God forever and ever."

[11] Between 1250 and 1880, Europe experienced some thirty-five starvation-level famines—an average of about one every eighteen years. Three of these famines were continental in scope and catastrophic in nature. Though war continued to play a horrifying role in creating famines after 1700, the natural cycle of famines was largely broken by the blessings that came in the form of scientific agriculture, beginning about that same year. Read more in Guido Alfani and Cormac Ó Gráda, eds., *Famine in European History*.

[12] There are so many places where the Wise make this point. We'll be content with two. Plato, in *Phaedrus* 246e-247c; Augustine, *City of God* 19.14 and especially 19.21.

[13] This incremental movement toward a slow, deeper understanding of things like *justice* or *right* is the ideal for a peaceful society, but it must be acknowledged that sometimes this ideal, too, is insincerely coopted and used by bad or naïve actors to prevent an increase in civil justice or moral good. Such a commandeering of this *Good* is messy and complicated, but it must be faced, as any moral failing must, if we are to escape it. See, for example, Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." The crucial thing is to be cautious and certain that we are ourselves sincerely committed to *bold humility,* and that we are interacting with others who are also sincerely committed to that perspective. If either side is only pretending, then we are left, again, with manipulation or savage domination as the definition of our relationship, and our communion is severed.

## Works Cited

à Kempis, Thomas. *The Imitation of Christ.* The Christian Library, 1984.

Alfani, Guido and Cormac Ó Gráda, editors. *Famine in European History.* Cambridge UP, 2017.

Aquinas. *Summa Theologica.* Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Ave Maria Press, 1948.

Aristotle. *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse.* Translated by George Kennedy, Oxford UP, 2006.

Augustine. *City of God.* Translated by William Chase Greene, Harvard UP, 1969.

Buechner, Frederick. *Godric.* HarperOne, 1999.

Chesterton, G. K. *The Everlasting Man.* Dodd Mead, 1925.

Cockburn, Bruce. "Café Society." *Bone on Bone,* True North Records, 2017.

Grace, Michelle. "Character & Crisis: Toxic Workplaces and Culture Change." *Character and . . . Crisis*, vol. 8, 2022, pp. 44-62.

Hartog, François. "Chronos, Kairos, and Krisis: The Genesis of Western Time." *History & Theory,* vol. 60, no. 3, 2021, pp. 425-439.

Hein, Molly. "Social Influencers: FOMO and Identity Crisis." *Character and . . . Crisis*, vol. 8, 2022, pp. 63-80.

Harl, Kenneth. *The Fall of the Pagans and the Origins of Medieval Christianity: Course Guidebook.* The Great Courses, 2011.

John Paul II, "Centesimus Annus." *Vatican Encyclicals*, 1 May 1991, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html.

King, Martin Luther, Jr. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 212, no. 2, Aug. 1963, pp. 78-88. California State University, https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/_assets/documents/susi-letter-from-birmingham-jail.pdf.

Lewis, C. S. *A Horse and His Boy.* Easton Press, 1982.

Ordway, Holly. *Not God's Type.* Ignatius, 2014.

Plato. *Phaedrus.* Translated by Robin Waterfield, Oxford UP, 2009.

---. *The Republic of Plato.* Translated by Allan Bloom, Basic Books, 2016.

Santucci, Luigi. *Meeting Jesus: A New Way to Christ.* Herder & Herder, 1971.

Thomas, Josh. "Healing a Fractured World." *Character and . . . Crisis*, vol. 8, 2022, pp. 12-27.

Turner, Ken. "Science and Integrity: A Pandemic Lens." *Character and . . . Crisis*, vol. 8, 2022, pp. 28-43.

Wendt Character Initiative

UNIVERSITY *of*
DUBUQUE