Character and . . .

Crisis

Wendt Character Initiative

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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.

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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

Dimensions of crisis

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:

> 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.

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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.

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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 crisis and calls for a character-infused response. For example, consider the

Character remains a central ingredient to positive ways forward.

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.

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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.

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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*).

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