Character and . . .

Crisis

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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]

Living and flourishing together

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 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.

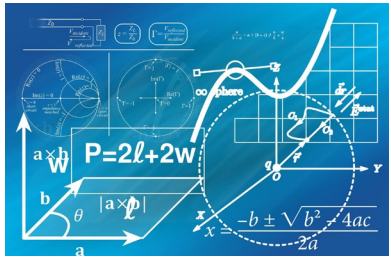
Turner takes up the issue of science and provides us with several perspectives that give us the opportunity to recognize our own limits in knowledge and understanding. He points out how these moments leaven a community in crisis. Community requires us to lean on each other’s strengths, and to allow others 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.

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

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.

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 in community

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 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.

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.*

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.

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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.

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