CHAPTER 11

Meditations in an Emergency

Pandemic-Era Library Leadership and Management

BOBBY L. SMILEY

> *"When sorrows come, they come not single spies but in battalions."*
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> (Claudius, *Hamlet*, Act IV, Scene V)

To invoke an old meteorological saw, March 2020 in Nashville indeed came in like a lion. Just after midnight on March 3rd, an EF3 tornado cut a 60-mile swath through the city and its environs, at times stretching well over a quarter mile in width and leaving in its wake flattened neighborhoods and lives taken, including in my own stomping grounds of East Nashville. Exactly ten days later, like many—if not most—institutions of higher education across the United States, Vanderbilt University reluctantly issued an edict

exiling almost all its staff of 9,000 from the campus "for at least two weeks" owing to the rapid spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. And, of course, what none of us exiled could have expected then was that that temporary displacement would be counted less in weeks and more in months. In retrospect, the March 3rd tornado proved a portentous event, presaging greater misfortune of a more protracted, pervasive, and epidemiological variety with a staggering loss of life, as well as unanticipated and indelible changes touching all settings not hitherto imaginable.

Despite the loss and inspissated gloom throughout the first two years of the pandemic, the Vanderbilt Divinity Library maintained services and access to resources, innovated and experimented around teaching and outreach, and sustained—and even strengthened—its relationship with the Divinity School. Concurrently, our larger library system endured financial uncertainty and demands for fiscal restraint, complex and ticklish University politics, greater operational scrutiny, and challenges and changes to its leadership. What follows is not an annotated chronology of events and actions surrounding the effects of COVID-19 on the Library, nor a scholarly disquisition on how individuals and institutions reacted *in extremis*, but rather a largely anecdotal series of meditations on these circumstances and lessons learned over the past three years as interim and then eventually permanent Director of the Divinity Library, a vaguely deputized not-so-temporary administrator for our resource sharing unit, and a more-involved-than-anticipated member of our library leadership team. These remarks may reflect my station as a campus library director organizationally nested within a large research university library system, but I have tried to speak generically enough to address concerns I imagine are shared by all colleagues, whether at small standalone seminaries, liberal arts colleges, or regional universities.

Maybe because of the mercurial, near-episodic nature of the past almost three years, I am offering my reflections, *caveat lector*, in a series of vignettes and ruminations expressed as theses in the format perhaps of Luther or Marx, Nietzsche or Adorno. For organization, I have numbered the propositions/observations, and divided the remarks into three sections: the first is an opening and brief theoretical "framing" (the bad pun will soon be evident), the second corresponds to leadership, and the third regards managing. I conclude narratively with some lessons learned for future consideration. And

while I know the conclusions I reach may be critical (even strident to some) I want what follows to be understood as empathetic, stressing generosity and grace toward all, and recognizing that none of us have faced challenges like these before March 2020.

Ultimately, I am not sure if it is our still extraordinary circumstances, or maybe where I find myself professionally, but the last two years have amplified for me the importance of good leadership, thoughtful management, and political and structural awareness of the institutional context in understanding libraries overall, but especially in the time of COVID-19. The reverberations from those experiences serve as the basis for my reflections.

I. Nice Frames, Some Introductory Scene Setting

Whether workplace or everyplace-related, taking personality inventories has perhaps unfairly always struck me as an exercise in apophenia; while the questions are anything but random, the answers they elicit fall too neatly into a series of crisp profiles and expected behaviors. But like Max Weber's notion of "ideal types" (1904), the tests can be useful conceptual heuristics for revealing motivations, unpacking decision-making, or comprehending the functioning (or perhaps the dysfunction) of the organizational culture under analysis.

Enter Lee Bolman and Terrence E. Deal's "four frames" (1991), a foundational analytical approach used in Harvard's summer Leadership Institute for Academic Librarians, and introduced to me by one of our Associate University Librarians as part of a leadership training session in March 2021. These frames help explain and make intelligible why and from what posture those leaders make decisions, manage personnel, or view the role of the library from a particular frame. Those frames are:

- *Structural*: "How structural design depends on an organization's circumstance, including its goals, strategy, technology, and environment" (43-44).
- *Human Resource*: "Centers on what organizations and people do to and for one another" (113).
- *Political*: "Politics is the realistic process of making decisions and allocating resources in the context of scarcity and divergent interests" (179).

- *Symbolic*: "Focuses on how myth and symbols help humans make sense of the chaotic, ambiguous world in which they live" (236).

Unsurprisingly, there is the inevitable quiz-style inventory associated with the four frames that suss out what frame you most frequently apply; the results have a horoscope-like accuracy, which either seems spookily spot-on or eye-rollingly off-the-mark, but that is not the entire point of what Bolman and Deal are trying to telegraph.

What they are providing is a reflective exercise to introduce a conceptual matrix that encourages perspectival thinking, which they describe as "multi-frame," which is "thinking [that] is challenging and counterintuitive. To see the same organization as a machine, family, jungle, and theatre requires a capacity to think in different ways at the same time about the same thing" (Bolman and Deal 1991, 422).

And while there are other ways to reckon with organizational dynamics and approaches to workplace problem-solving, the frames have offered me a helpful analytical tool that has informed how I have read the action of those in authority, and have broadened my own approach to understanding problems and designing solutions. As I wrote the following, I kept returning to frames as a way of understanding my reflections. That my principal frames are "political" and "human resource," I believe, are manifest, and complement how I think about leadership (people and operationally oriented) and management (animated by advocacy and transparency).

II. Leadership? What Leadership?

1. "Bad leaders react. Good leaders plan. Great leaders think." (Hoffman 2019)

1.1. When I began my career as a professional librarian, I confess one of the last places I envisioned myself was in a formal leadership position, or even notionally invested in a robust idea of leadership as an essential precondition for a motivated and successful organization. Given my longstanding intellectual commitments, until I became

a professional librarian I was cynically dismissive of the idea of leadership *qua* leadership, often viewing it as an empty signifier for vacuous business-speak trotted out to dress up "bold" decisions or justify the caprice of people in charge. What I eventually discovered is that leadership is better described as a floating signifier rather than an empty one, and that its plural definitions have ultimately proven more empowering than limiting or intellectually bankrupt. Whatever "leadership" is (vision, uplift, charisma, analytical acumen, inspiration and direction, *et hoc genus omne*), it is more organizationally requisite and meaningful than any single definition can convey.

1.1.1. Admittedly, I was never in an organization or in a position where something so abstract or discursively gossamer appeared to matter. But now in a large organization positioned in middle management, I rapidly learned leadership matters tremendously.

1.1.2. If this recognition was belated, then the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has furnished a post-graduate course in the all-encompassing import of leadership, specifically leadership style in a time of crisis and its amplificatory effects on an organization at all levels.

1.2. Whether around an office water-cooler or a cocktail in a bar (or on Zoom in your pajamas), casual analysis of leadership styles invariably includes arm-chair psychoanalysis, and while potentially revealing and always satisfying (like taking a hit of something Freudian no doubt), the insights yielded help more to explain an individual leader rather than that specific leader's effect on an organization. Stepping back from the conjectured origins of one person's dispositions, I have, nonetheless, found it helpful to name what those dispositions are and how they surface to enable or exacerbate tensions, concerns, or assumptions affecting staff morale.

1.2.1. While trait theory has long fallen out of fashion in leadership studies and organizational psychology, in my experience aspects of a leader's personality can and often do influence morale, bespeaking how and why decisions are made.

> "Nothing true can be said about God from a posture of defense." (Robinson 2004, 177)

2.1. As librarians know all too well, libraries are frequently marginal to university-level decision-making and generally have less purchase or independent agency in the institutional governance and politics of higher education.

2.2. Fobazi Ettarh's idea of "'vocational awe' refers to the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique" (Ettarh 2018). In a similar vein, as my perspicacious predecessor Bill Hook wrote well over a decade ago, "while librarians see as self-evident that there are intrinsic values and goods served by libraries, we frequently incorrectly assume that those intrinsic values are shared by our institutional administrators and are surprised and even distressed when we find that this is not necessarily the case" (Hook 2009, 20). Confronted by the consequences of those asymmetries of power, the fallout from that normative framework is an internalized self-righteousness about the apodictic importance of libraries and librarians, which, while genuine and frequently justified, tends to manifest as incredulity and defensiveness shading into victimhood.

2.3. Leaders who activate or aggravate this disposition of an injured pride pin-pricked with defensiveness, I believe, damage library organizations by reaffirming an inflated sense of uniqueness and thereby distance, eroding trust between the libraries and university—creating an us vs. them mentality—and contributing to a generic feeling of disenfranchisement among staff.

> 2.3.2. In doing so, leaders exhibiting, or explicitly expressing those traits, whether indirectly or publicly, complicate the role of the middle manager in several ways. Managing up and motivating down furnish the most immediate challenges, but it can place that middle manager at variance with leadership when trying to work with colleagues outside the libraries.
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> 2.3.3. And if leadership is not unjustifiably frustrated, but intransigent in their resignation, this defensiveness can also forestall

opportunities to build positive relationships with known supportive university administrators.

2.4. "[F]or the librarian who proposes realistic changes," Bill Hook argues, "and seeks input from the administration will be seen as a valuable conversation partner during times of restraint." Ultimately, this means for library leadership, he urged, "resisting the temptation to cast the library as a victim … [which] can be presented in the context of the institution-wide restraints, rather than specific 'persecution' of the library." (Hook 2009, 21).

3. Taking Administration by Strategy

3.1. Routinely concomitant with defensiveness is an impatient and anxious posture of needing to react immediately rather than approaching crisis situations or entreaties from the university intentionally and in concert with larger strategic priorities.

3.2. In an emergency, runs an old aviation adage, the first thing you should do is wind your watch. Watch winding affords distance, establishes or affirms boundaries, enjoins you to look both retrospectively or comparatively (what have you done, what are others doing), and it allows you to knit reacting to immediate requests or contingencies to your larger goals, objectives, and strategic framework—if you have one.

3.3. Indeed, not wanting to have goals and objectives or a strategic framework in place, or maintaining indifference to these as indispensable to effective leadership is, I believe, in effect, an abdication of leadership.

3.3.1. Whereas not aligning the strategy you do have with the mission and vision of the institution is often an exercise in futility and a recipe for frequent defeat.

3.4. It is a pop business-lit move to adduce the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz's canonical treatise *On War* when discussing leadership, but you do begin to discern the utility of his work after spending a few years in a leadership role in a large organization.

3.5. "Tactics is the theory of the use of military forces in battle," Clausewitz explains, while "strategy is the theory of the use of battles for the object of the war" (Clausewitz 1918, 86).

3.6. The martial language notwithstanding, Clausewitz's distinction between tactics and strategies illumined for me how the library's overall approach was to react tactically rather than understanding our actions as part of a larger project that required a plan patterned on strategies.

3.7. And while good tactics may afford victory discretely, Clausewitz emphasized that sound strategy enables the final victory, and ultimately brokers an enduring peace (Clausewitz 1918, 111). In our context, that counsel from Clauswitz means couching our tactics in a strategy that aligns with the university priorities for the library, thereby ensuring a more irenic relationship with a higher degree of cooperation and trust.

3.8. The onus is on the library to enact a strategy that tactically establishes and demonstrates what it understands as important, but, in the aggregate, can ladder up coherently to broader goals, the vision, and the mission. By "coherently," I mean how the library's actions or petitions fall into patterns contributing to the larger strategic narrative, and how they can *in toto* demonstrate intelligibly to those outside the library how the moves it makes or metrics used to index its success help further broader, shared considerations.

III. I am managing

4. Thank You, The Management

4.1. If tactics and strategy can be different but related enterprises, then management and leadership can possess a similarly different, but nonetheless still codependent relationship. If leadership trades in elevating the collective, then that inspiriting loftiness should cash out in management as a translation exercise into the concrete and quotidian. From the very beginning of the pandemic, I was confronted with situations that made manifest this relationship and revealed to me how the way I approach my role as Director informs my view of both.

4.2. In the welter of uncertainty that was March 2020, the initial reaction to working from home (WFH) from some in upper leadership all the way to individual line managers was unsurprising and

personally disappointing. Unsurprising insofar as higher education as an industry, outside of faculty, in the main had been highly skeptical, if not outrightly inimical, to the idea of working from home; how that skepticism and hostility played out furnished my disappointment. That disappointment manifested around managerial distrust, which was evinced by a near-paranoia about productivity and a penchant among too many for Stasi-like surveillance, typically accompanied by constant and, ultimately, time-wasting reporting out.

4.2.1 In a moment of headshaking, "I thought we were better than that, bro" frustration, I pounded out a manifesto, which I circulated among trusted colleagues, which in turn made it around to others Samizdat-style. What follows is that manifesto, frozen in amber and impatient for its arguments to be accepted, which, in retrospect, I confess, seems to trade a little too excitedly in treating now (or even then) basically axiomatic propositions as original insights.

5. "Theses on Not Being a/an [preferred term of opprobrium] Supervisor While WFH During a Pandemic" (March 2020)

5.1. *Things are different, but the same* (a.k.a., just because you're working remotely doesn't mean everyone is, *ipso facto*, slacking unless monitored). We already know what each of us does, and even have a good sense of what we don't do (and how well we do or don't do). And we know that productive work doesn't always look productive. These things remain true when you're working remotely. Remember these things.

5.2. *Trust but verify (But trust first/more*). While a tweak of a putatively Russian maxim quoted *ad nauseam* by Ronald Reagan when dealing with the Soviets, it's useful to remember with its parenthetical appendage, notwithstanding this political association. If you can trust folks on site, you can trust them at home—in the main, they're professionals and adults. Verification in this context presupposes good contingency planning (GCP) and scheduled communication that is frequent but not invasive or designed to surprise or entrap presumed goldbrickers. GCP should involve a simple way of naming work to be done, and how to report out that work. Bullet points and B+'s are good enough. GCP also suggests alternative activities and expects contingencies, while acknowledging work may look exactly

the same as it does on-site but also may take longer/be more complicated to accomplish (see 6.1).

5.3. *Asynchronous presence*. With synchronous communication software like Slack or MS Teams, we now have an effective and easy way to communicate while also possessing a tool that can easily be harnessed for the worst of already-bad surveillance capitalism. When using the chat function, think of communication like texting or sending an email: one can reasonably expect a timely response, but not impatiently anticipate an immediate one. If you want an immediate response, place a call. Given the presumed weight with which calling is freighted, recall if you'd like to receive a call for the same thing (see 6.5). Also, "status" [on-screen indication of availability] should be read generously—assume positive intent.

5.4. *Keep the Sabbath Holy*. Just because someone is reachable, that does not mean they're always available or even should be. Especially, especially now, when folks are working at home, boundaries need to be respected, and reinforcing time away from work should be minded as attentively as time marked out for it. Just as WFH doesn't immediately make people lazy or conniving, it doesn't flatly equate with 24/7 availability or transform weekends into weekdays.

5.5. *Check your supervisory privilege*. I'm tempted to use the more Žižekian/Lacanian, "check your enjoyment," but I think "privilege" is probably more readily intelligible and less potentially affronting. Ask yourself about your reporting expectations for staff: are they ones that you would be content if applied to you? And even if they are, ask yourself if is this concretely furthering the work of the library, or just providing personal reassurance and fodder for external validation that you're doing your job as a manager?

6. Do Look Back

6.1. Shorn of the overheated diction or somewhat accusatory rhetorical questions, I think many of these propositions are accepted to a degree not imaginable in many quarters prior to the start of the pandemic. At that time, you can tell I was fixated on countering arguments from the administration about potential under-productivity. But had this been one year or even six months later, the stress would fall on acknowledging the psychological fallout from COVID-19 and the equal import of self-care. Who would have guessed at the

beginning that it was not unproductivity, but rather hyper-productivity and the attendant burnout that should have concerned managers most?

IV. The Future of What

If the pandemic has taught me anything as a director, it is that my disposition to think in the political frame has been amplified over the past three years in ways that have eclipsed, to an even greater degree, my capacity for reasoning through the human resources frame. What I mean is that the foregoing thoughts about leadership and management highlight insights (such as they are) stoked by the pandemic, but hardly unique to the pandemic experience. I would argue that the concerns I voiced or conclusions I have drawn about leadership style, institutional politics, or effective management have always been quiescent, almost beyond dispute. That the pandemic helped surface and accelerate those issues, I would also argue, is even more incontrovertible.

Identifying spaces and places where my perhaps exaggerated sense of the political frame subtends the structural and symbolic frames has been one of the salutary challenges as Director over the last three years. For me, those challenges have coalesced around several areas, and two key, interrelated ones have been constructing a narrative and implementing meaningful assessment.

Common to any complex organization, communication is a perennial problem for libraries, both internally and externally. Concerning external communication, while libraries might be effective in reporting out, in my experience they typically are less successful with (or often unaware of the necessity for) messaging; that is, we like to let the university know what we have been up to, but we fail to provide a narrative that connects the library's work with the university's strategic priorities. As E. M. Forster might have expressed it, we are all story, no plot (Forster 1974).

In their institutional reporting, libraries like to recount their successes, invoke indices of use, spotlight marquee acquisitions or collections, and, if lucky, extol a wealthy alum or corporate bigwig for their benefaction and munificence. What plaits these stories together is an implicit argument about the self-evident value of libraries (vocational awe, anyone?), but this argument, so manifest to us in

the profession, is much less obvious beyond the superficial level to those on the outside. Indeed, I imagine that to the skeptical administrator, the library value argument from self-evidence can often be so occluded that it may remind them of Churchill's disappointing dessert: "pray remove it—it has no theme" (Home 1976, 119). And to cost-conscious administrators, as one of my colleagues observed with impertinent perceptiveness: "the libraries aren't the dorms." We are a cost center, not a money maker, and while requisite and necessary, we can still be kept alive through trickle-down undernourishment, rather like feeding the sparrows by feeding the horses.

Effective library narratives require a robust backstory: a clear mission explicitly aligned with the university; statements of shared values accepted staff-wide; and a strategic plan that accents the library's value-add through reach and impact, active engagement, and mechanisms for continuous improvement. From there, those individual library stories can be embedded in a narrative arc that is more transparent in conveying the value the library provides and names more obviously the stakes for both the library and its governing institution.

Narratives not only help connect libraries to the university's work, but also they make meaningful assessment possible. Narratives are also a good way to militate against a mindless aggregation of statistics we use to convince university administrators of our value. And unfortunately, it is a besetting problem that goes back to the fact that we like to collect statistics, but those statistics are practically unintelligible to anybody outside the library. As the historian of science Theodore Porter explains, "quantification is a technology of distance," which furnishes "a way of making decisions without seeming to decide," and its "objectivity lends authority to officials who have very little of their own" (Porter 1995, 8). The concomitant frustration felt by librarians who trot these statistics out to university administrators, who in turn look at them and blink in bemusement, is something that can be substantially redressed by developing strategically informed, meaningful assessments.

For any assessment to be meaningful or useful, it must first be connected to an objective that issues from a goal constituting part of the vision or mission of the library. Without that strategic alignment, the library should recognize and acknowledge that, for data collected and reported, those "data themselves are not assessment" (Horowitz 2011). What often results from treating data as assessment is decision-based evidence-making; that is, data are back-narrated to

explain decisions that ultimately were not informed by those data. A further consequence of this thinking is an overemphasis on use and output and an accompanying attachment to measurements and benchmarks, what historian Jerry Z. Muller calls "metric fixation" (2018, 3).

Metric fixation can often be a product of anxiety and is usually a proxy for demonstrating value. And "problems arise," Muller argues, "when such measures become the criteria used to reward and punish" (2018, 7). The corollary to metric fixation is what economists call Goodhart's Law; in its most frequently paraphrased version, it is the idea that when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure (Goodhart 1975). In the face of uncertain and capricious punishment or reward, find a measurement and make it higher, larger, or faster. And the work done by those superlative numbers and the putative objectivity they afford, Porter observes, often "names a set of strategies for dealing with distance and distrust" (Porter 1995, ix), especially if an organization that deploys that data feels institutional distance and distrust even more keenly.

This is not to say that measurements *in toto* are not useful or, indeed, necessary, but it is to suggest that those numbers can only make sense if they are gathered for a bigger project—work in service of a larger narrative—that enables the library to explain to its campus peers how its work is pervasive and empowering to its users. And what I believe the pandemic has, perforce, moved libraries toward is recognizing that if we are to demonstrate value (however that may be understood) we need to shift from use to users, from generic to local, from outputs to impact.

In a symbolic sense, what narratives provide is an opportunity for agency, and assessments can help substantiate that agency. If the library can craft its message, buttressed by meaningful data, then it can speak back (albeit best in the language of the institution's mission) in a way that, in the most ideal scenario, can help set agendas and afford innovation.

The idea of agency points to my closing pandemic-borne lesson: create solutions on your terms to spare others the opportunity cost of having to do it themselves. Whether it was a new service or indirect strategic planning, I discovered more opportunities than I would have anticipated in an emergency situation (what Homer Simpson once aptly described as "crisitunity") (1994) for starting or even accomplishing longstanding goals that many library directors felt would benefit and unify the libraries. Again, while not unique to the

pandemic, I ultimately feel—like the other lessons discussed in my commentary—the recent past has heightened contradictions as well as possibilities, and in so doing, it also revealed tensions that can be productive.

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