

INTRODUCTION

AT THE INTERSECTION WHERE WORLDS COLLIDE

Sierra Leone is a small West African nation on the Atlantic Ocean tucked between Guinea and Liberia. Its name means “Lion Mountains.” Like most African nations, it has a long history of European exploitation dating back as far as 1652, when the first slaves were taken from its shores and shipped to the Sea Islands in what is now the United States. Sierra Leone was founded as a British colony in 1792 as a settlement for freed slaves from the United States and Nova Scotia. Its capital, Freetown, was originally called “the Province of Freedom.” From 1991 to 2002, Sierra Leone was engaged in a bloody civil war that resulted in tens of thousands of deaths and the displacement of more than two million people (about one-third of the population).

In 1998 I visited Freetown with a colleague to interview people who had been affected by the political turmoil wrought by the war. Young rebels, drugged and coerced into militias by powerful chieftains, were being used to disrupt the fragile political order of this poverty-stricken nation. The chieftains created the disorder in order to smuggle diamonds to rich, clandestine actors who profited from Sierra Leone’s misery. We heard the stories of many of the youth and their elders who had been displaced by the invasion of rebel gangs. We met with women and families that had been torn apart and with local religious leaders who had been hiding for days in the bush to escape marauding rebel militias. Late one evening, ensconced in our temporary abode, the deserted Solar Hotel in the heart of Freetown, I made a journal entry:

The effects of the recent crisis are everywhere—Nigerian soldiers serving as peacekeepers, high security checks at airports, bombed out and burned down buildings, mass graves, and poverty that is unspeakable. . . .

Everything is broken here—the buildings, the machines, the dogs, the people—but in the midst of it all there is a resiliency, like the ocean beyond my window in this dilapidated hotel. We are at the intersection where worlds are colliding!

On the Sunday before I left Freetown, I preached at the historic Regent Road Baptist Church, the oldest Baptist congregation on the African continent founded in 1792 by returning former slaves who fought in the American War of Independence. My sermon was titled “Building New Roads to the Future.” In the sermon I expressed my deep feelings of solidarity with the local people and spoke about the hope that comes from commitment to the gospel of peace. All the while, I was acutely aware of the destruction of rich but frail traditions that had sustained them through slavery and colonialism. As I looked upon the faces of the people in the congregation of the small wooden church, I searched for signs of hope amid the despair that had enveloped their world. And there were signs, especially among the youth who had endured their nation’s devastation. Somehow, they believed that in spite of the present, they would survive and again know the joy of family and community.

I closed the sermon with a story of a stranger who rescued starfish from the ocean’s shore. As the tiny, delicate starfish, removed from their source of nurture and life, struggled on the shore, the stranger would reach down, lift them up, and return them to the ocean. Soon others joined the stranger, creating a community of searchers who assisted the stranger in reaching down, lifting up, and restoring the beautiful creatures to their home. I left the church that morning believing that these people would find their way to the shores of their beloved nation and return to the source of their hope: the deep-seated traditions and rituals that inspired possibility. “Naïve? Perhaps,” I thought to myself. But without such hope, they were destined to despair. I discovered later that the church was burned to the ground by the young rebels.

I knew something about young rebels from a different place and time. The experience of Sierra Leone called me back to an experience I had eight years earlier. Two people from my childhood, Enola and Inky, visited me in a dream. Enola was a young woman brought up on the South Side of Chicago who had a reputation for precipitous violence—like the *Enola Gay*, the aircraft that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. She discarded her own rage and left an ominous cloud of memories that still hovered over places I had tried to forget. Enola, along with other members of her street gang, the Four Corners Blackstone Rangers, crashed a party

at our house thirty years earlier. She assaulted my sister and terrorized our guests. When the gang members left, they threw a huge tire drum through the front window. Despite eleven telephone calls to the police, they arrived about a half hour after the rampage was over. I shall never forget the wearied, defeated look on my father's face as he stood there in his undershirt, explaining to the officers the damage wreaked upon his family, but unable to express the harrowing fear and powerlessness of a displaced black Southerner in a complex, post-industrial urban culture.

Inky—I never knew his real name—was a street ruffian. He, too, had a reputation for violence and hung out on 43rd Street, commonly referred to as “the Bucket of Blood.” He was a member of a street gang called the Devil's Disciples, the rival of the Blackstone Rangers. I would often see him on street corners, waiting with his cohorts for fresh prey.

Why I would dream of them in my fortieth year? I don't know. I do know that I was afraid of Inky and Enola and of myself. To grow up psychologically abused by an environment that encourages violence is to live in a perpetual state of fear, always watching and postured for the moment of sudden confrontation with the “other.” My biography is the story of escape from the fate of young people like Inky, Enola, and countless others who die before they are born. But one never escapes one's history—the stories and epochal events that shape character, dreams, and aspirations. Mine had been a journey away from the pain of living in a world of fear and dread—of unknowing.

After two years of military service, fourteen years of higher education, and several pastoral and academic positions, I had been moving away from the humiliation of being powerless, unable to deal with the violence of my past environment and the awful battle that still raged within. I had forgotten my name. I was afraid to remember, for in remembering, I had to claim responsibility for the creation of a self that sometimes drifted aimlessly through a sea of names—names manufactured and stolen for the sake of comfort and safe zones. James Baldwin wrote in *The Fire Next Time*: “To accept one's past—one's history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it.” But there is no escape, no safe place from dangerous memories. They are unsolicited and unwelcome intruders that break into places we have sealed off and secured with layers of fictitious scenarios and masks donned to hide from guilt and shame. Enola and Inky just walked in unannounced, uninvited, and crashed the party.

Enola and Inky visited me. They took me for a walk, a kind of tour through the old 'hood. They were escorts, guides of a sort. We started

somewhere around 39th and Ellis. They escorted me past Ben and Ray's grocery store, where my father, like many poor African Americans, had a small credit line to hold him over until he was able to pay. Enola and Inky took me up and down the Bucket of Blood. There, again, I saw the faces of the lost and lame, the forgotten and misbegotten, the broken and the bruised. It is still painful to see those faces—faces revealing horrible secrets, repressed memories, and untold stories about America that Alexis deTocqueville, Gunnar Myrdal, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and Jacob S. Hacker could only write about but never truly experience. I guess the thing I remember most about my tour was the intense gloom, the hollowness, the sense of abandonment and horror. And in these faces, in the looks of powerlessness, I saw my own face, fearful and unknowing.

Strangely, after this tour through hell, my guides brought me into a mansion, a temple of sorts, and we gazed together out a huge window. There, just beyond the window, a lush green field spread before us, each blade of grass saturated with beams of golden light. It was beauty and light, a feeling of release, a healing on the other side of hell. I stood there entranced, enraptured by a joy I have never known. In that splendid moment, that one God-drenched second—I gazed into myself. Suddenly, I realized I was alone. Inky and Enola had left, yet they spoke to me in one deep, resonant voice: “We just dropped by to tell you there is hope.”

How strange that Inky and Enola would visit me in liminal zones, in those mystical time-slits between sleeping and waking, and conjure up these memories. There I was, a forty-year-old African American male—ambiguously “successful,” yet lost in America, lost in history, lost in the hell of a million nightmares of memories.

Since this dream, I have inquired about Inky. What he is doing now, I don't know; but if statistics are any measure of fate for African American men like Inky, it is likely that he is unemployed, on parole, and a member of the permanent underclass, which William Julius Wilson calls “the truly disadvantaged.”

Enola—well, her story ended the way she lived: in violence. She was found dead in a car, murdered, twenty years earlier. Some think her killing was drug-related. The word is that she became trapped in the cycle of living death, part of a community of people fated by social and economic conditions to spend their lives as inmates of a cultural asylum manufactured by powerful and indiscriminate systems. Inky and Enola were caught at the intersection where worlds collide!

I have often reflected on this dream and my experiences in Sierra Leone and how they relate to the challenges of emerging leadership in the twenty-first century. Clearly, preaching about hope is not enough; calling upon devastated people to return to traditions that have historically nurtured and sustained them in the midst of political and social upheaval is necessary to reconstruct the civic fabric essential to nation-building, but it is ultimately inadequate. When powerful systems that transact business at the speed of light are in the hands of leaders who profit from misery, the call to community, whether in Sierra Leone or on the South Side of Chicago, appears naïve and hypocritical. Tiny Davids who have nothing in their hands but slingshots and stones are no match for the Goliaths of the world. Yet there must be a place of beginning for those who would seek change and transformation. Such a place must be the province of the individual—not the solitary individual who is disassociated from history, but the individual who is rooted in the ambiguities and contingencies of history and yet dares to believe in and hope for a livable future.

Such an individual does not take stock in the “original position” that seeks community through instrumental reason or moral sentiment alone. Rather, through self-discovery, one seeks community as a constituent dimension of his or her being—and in seeking, one finds others of like mind. The goal of the moral life of these seekers begins and ends in community, and their ethical project seeks the same in every dimension of life—personally, socially, and spiritually. As a rational construction and method, community is both the goal and norm of the ethical life; but the “sense of community” is the inner dimension of feelings, emotions, and yearnings that seeks wholeness in all encounters with tragedy, despair, and destructiveness. For leaders at the intersection, it is the basis for their response and practice when “things fall apart.” Imagine a community of seekers who in their search for personal meaning and authenticity find not only themselves but others whom they had not known. The future of our world depends on the connections that these lonely seekers make and the kind of communities of discourse and practice that they create.

A favorite exercise that I use in workshops with leaders across various public venues is to ask them to stand, close their eyes, and imagine that they are at the center of a busy intersection with traffic coming from all directions. I ask them to imagine that there are no stoplights or traffic cops—just oncoming traffic. I also ask them to imagine the sounds at the intersection: running motors, screeching brakes, screams and shouts from people on the sidewalks and in cafes. I ask them to visualize the

intersection: people moving back and forth with the pulsating rhythm of urban life, the beggar sitting in the wheelchair outside a building, children holding their parents' hands, and the rushing traffic coming toward them from the front, the rear, the left, and the right. Then I ask, "How do you feel?" The responses normally are: I am afraid, confused, paralyzed. "What will you do?" I will run and dodge the traffic. I will tell the traffic to stop! I will cry for help! I will pray to God! I don't know what to do! "Do you know which way is north? Do you even have time to figure out which way is north?" Most do not know which way is north. Compasses of all sorts, material and moral, come in handy when you are on hiking trips or sailing through life, but they really are useless at the intersection. Finally, I ask, "How will you negotiate this traffic at the intersection?" Very few have credible responses. How to negotiate the traffic at the intersection where worlds collide is the question this book seeks to answer.

Nobody gets out of the intersection alone. There is no such thing as a solitary individual who escapes the intersection and saves the world. Every great leader who has brought about creative change and transformation has done so with a community of fellow travelers who are organized around vision, mission, and specific goals and strategies. Hope without a plan is a dangerous fantasy. Creative change and transformation begin and end with a sense of community. The ethical leader seeks community as both a starting point and the end of her existence. In doing so, she stands in candidacy for a hope that cannot be diminished by external forces of power and dominance. In the midst of worlds colliding, she dares to raise the primary ethical question in public life: What's going on? It is not enough to ponder the ideas of morals and values as isolated, unrelated, individualistic phenomena. It is necessary to analyze and interrogate complex internal and environmental issues, to interpret data that do not fit into convenient categories or principles, and to discern one's fitting decisions and actions. A threefold process ensues from this initial question: discernment, deliberation, and decision, all of which will find greater elaboration in the following chapters.

PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SPHERES OF THE INTERSECTION

First and foremost, the intersection is fiercely private—it is personal and intimate. It is a place of the convergence of dreams, aspirations, ideals, and hopes. It is also the place where dreams, aspirations, ideals, and hopes are

often disappointed, defeated, demolished, and dashed against the rocks. This place is not merely psychological or social but profoundly spiritual. In respect to the formation and role of leaders, my concern is with spirituality as a basis for ethical orientation. We ask, “How might we prepare leaders to recognize the need and place of spirituality in the development of habits and practices that nurture morally anchored character, transformative acts of civility, and a sense of community?”

The intersection is also public in the sense that it is the space where citizens meet and engage in meaningful discussion and action about values, and where they hold one another accountable for what they know and value. As Thomas McCollough suggests, “Meaningful discussion about values presupposes a common lifeworld, a shared cultural context within which persons respect one another and care about ideas and values as determinants of their life together.”¹ In the public sphere, issues such as class, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and religion both form and inform how one understands the private self. Yet the private self must have a public connection. That is, through a web of relationships and networks, individuals are able to actualize their deepest dreams, hopes, ideals, and aspirations. The intersection represents, therefore, both private and public spaces where a new generation of leadership must stand, negotiate, and redirect the traffic of lifeworlds and systems.

“Lifeworlds” refers to the commonplace, everyday traffic of life where people meet and greet one another, where common values and presuppositions about order and the world are held. “Systemworlds” refers to the vast, often impersonal bureaucratic systems dominated by money and power (economics and politics and the various structures of communications and technology), which are frequently at odds with the pedestrian traffic of lifeworlds. Lifeworlds are built on social practices, traditions, and institutions that are often at odds with systemworlds, where technical reason and the relentless quest for power and money assault their very fragile existence. Leadership in the new century will depend largely on how well new generations of ethical leaders negotiate the traffic at these intersections and inspire and guide others to create community.

Standing at the intersection where worlds collide is, at best, hazardous duty. Sierra Leone is only a microcosm of what’s going on around the globe. In fact, the increasing incidence of “political violence” directed at and perpetuated by the United States is symptomatic of the social pathology that plagues our private and public worlds—and of the untold histories that converge at the intersection. The image of leaders standing at the

intersection reminds me of a poster I once saw that depicted three little kittens cuddled together in a basket of yarn with mischievous gleams in their eyes, ready to brave some immediate adventure. The caption underneath the poster read “You and me against the world. Boy, are we going to get creamed!” When you stand at the centermost place of your convictions and dare to speak and act in public, expect to get creamed! The intersection is dangerous territory.

Ronald Heifitz and Martin Linsky offer sound advice to leaders at the intersection: “You appear dangerous to people when you question their values, beliefs, or habits of a lifetime. You place yourself on the line when you tell people what they need to hear rather than what they want to hear. Although you may see with clarity and passion a promising future of progress and gain, people will see with equal passions the losses you are asking them to sustain.”² They add that leaders must distinguish between adaptive challenges and technical challenges that arise in advocating for change. Technical challenges ask leaders, as authorities, to apply current knowledge to the problem that needs to be addressed, but adaptive challenges demand that the people who do the work learn new ways of addressing problems. Adaptive challenges are fraught with danger because the leader is asking for changes that result in loss, disloyalty to old beliefs and assumptions, and a sense of incompetence. According to Heifitz and Linsky, danger has many faces—faces of seduction, diversion, marginalization, and attack, which are tactics people use to resist change. When leaders ask people to change, they must expect resistance at the intersection.

DEBATES AT THE INTERSECTION

The intersection is noisy, and as a result, it is often difficult to hear what others are saying. It is also a place dominated by fear, deceit, and threats of violence. I often think that road rage is more symptomatic of the crowded roadways and intersections of our day-to-day lives than simply a psychological phenomenon. This is true also for the extremist points of view represented in culture wars—bombings, assassinations, and subversive tactics that could easily be labeled “terrorist” by most standards.

One of the major examples of incivility is rooted in the dangerous contest between religious and secular discourses. Much of the incivility that characterizes this contest is a consequence of what Michael Walzer calls “maximalist moral language,” which is public discourse that is

embedded in specific moral contexts and used in confrontational political speech. Walzer also identifies this kind of moral argument as “thick” moral discourse as opposed to “thin.” Thin descriptions of moral problems are rather easy points of agreement, as in applying the golden rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” But thick descriptions demand more than broad areas of agreement, because they involve the critical issues of difference. Contemporary issues of same-sex marriage, abortion, and euthanasia are embedded in long-standing religious convictions, traditions, and interpretations of truth. Conflict surrounding thick moral disagreements results in an inability to hear the other with empathy and respect.

Kwame Anthony Appiah has suggested that the future of cosmopolitanism hinges on how well we distinguish between thin and thick moral arguments in public debates. He identifies three kinds of disagreement about values: failing to share a vocabulary of evaluation, giving different interpretations to the same vocabulary, and giving the same values different weights. The challenge, however, is not always to come to consensus on right and wrong or good and bad, but to seek ways of understanding, because the particularity, or thickness, of some arguments does not allow for ready agreement through moral argumentation. Appiah suggests that, in the final analysis, learning to live with different interpretations of values relies more on practice than on argumentation. Some scholars suggest that it is for this reason that religious citizens, when they engage in public discourse, should refrain from appeals to faith-based or sectarian language that does not have a common vocabulary; the emphasis ought to be on listening to the other, which is a disciplined practice that involves personal virtues—integrity, empathy, and hope—that are related to character and analogous public values—recognition, respect, and reverence—that form the basis of civility.

How then might leaders learn to move beyond thick moral discourse to a more balanced interrogation of the possibilities inherent in the contentious debates at the intersection? I believe that leaders must begin by examining their own assumptions, beliefs, and presuppositions about order and power. Such examinations involve more than critical methodologies concerned with analytic and cognitive processes; they must also include affective undertakings that are rooted in a sense of community that is personal, public, and spiritual. The spiritual dimension is decidedly communal and requires practices that we call “virtuosities” or spiritual excellencies of courage, a sense of justice and compassion. Remembering, retelling, and

reliving our own stories are important steps in that process. Leaders at the intersection must also look, listen, and learn from others whose lifestyles and traditions are radically different from their own.

LEADERSHIP AT THE INTERSECTION

Finally, the intersection poses another problem that is even more fundamental to our present state. Not only is society in crisis; leadership itself is in crisis. There is a lot of quarreling at the intersection over which way to go. My childhood pastor used to tell a story about two snakes in a barn that caught fire: one snake had ten heads and the other had one. The pastor would always ask, “Which snake will get out?” He would answer, “The snake with one head will escape while the other burns up arguing over which way to go!” My pastor’s story represents the traditional understanding of leadership as one person who serves as the authority for decisions and actions relative to the direction that the group will take. This response, however, is highly problematic, given the multiplicity of complex challenges and issues that confront leaders at the intersection. Leaders of the future will need to reimagine creative ways of constructing responses at intersections where worlds collide. What if we were to explore ways in which all ten snake heads would respond if they were able and willing to collaborate and organize a communal response for the crisis at hand? Surely, ten heads with twenty eyes can see more possibilities than only one head with two eyes.

The critical issue at stake is the need for leadership to envision itself as a community of discourse and practice that is attuned to the kind of networking and decision-making that uses all available resources to respond to the crisis at hand. A community of leaders who are adept at communicating with one another requires more than the traditional approaches that highlight individual leaders as the center of authority. It requires the identification and training of a new generation of leaders who are able to look, listen, and learn together at the intersections. Moreover, it requires certain virtues, values, and virtuosities (or moral excellencies) that encourage collaborative leadership. The skills we are recommending revolve around three pivotal concepts: character, civility, and community, which are the defining concepts of ethical leadership.