

Reflections on Leadership



Defining Moments - Turning Points

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Psychologists often refer to the concept of defining moments – certain events in life that shape the person you have become. These events can be positive or negative, but they play an outsized role in the narrative that a person constructs about what has meaning for them and how they see life. Depending on how these events are recalled, they can result in a person seeing themselves as a lifelong victim of circumstance or serve as a springboard to successfully overcoming obstacles. Sometimes there are significant events that become a common defining moment. Most people of a certain age can tell you where they were when they heard that John Kennedy was assassinated, or when the 9/11 attack occurred. Author Jeffrey Archer has observed that *“There are defining moments in one’s life when you learn about yourself, and you deposit that knowledge in the experience account, so you can draw on it at some later date.”*

The idea of defining moments coincides with my belief that every one of us has a story that includes important life changing events. The main difference between people is that some of us are more willing to share our story than others. If you doubt that you have a story to tell, think about the following: *Describe an experience or an event that makes you who you are today; or Tell me a story that will help me to understand who you are as a person.* Given a few minutes to reflect on these thoughts, a whole

series of stories will emerge - stories of relationships, loss, opportunities, family, career, and childhood.

My wife, Rhonda often tells me that I have a story for almost everything, and I guess that is mostly true. Reading through the Book of **Reflections on Leadership** you can easily identify many defining moments in my life. The story of my mother locking the door so I would have to face the schoolyard bully, the decision of how to respond to the unjust criticism of a difficult supervisor, the impact of mentors in my life, and the story of how I met the woman who has been the love of my life are just a few of the many personal stories that fill the pages. Each one represents a defining moment in my life.



Chip and Dan Heath have written an insightful book called **The Power of Moments** that explores how these moments are created and their impact on each of us. They divided these moments into 4 general areas:

- Moments of elevation – experiences that rise above the every day.

- Moments of insight – positive or negative experiences that deliver a moment of realization or transformation.
- Pride – having a skill recognized by others or having someone who believes in us.
- Connection – social moments when others are present to experience a time of shared meaning.

Some events can fill more than one of the boxes listed above. A graduation from high school or college feel like a rite of passage (elevation), a realization that the next phase of life is filled with opportunity that will bring new challenges (insight), pride over achieving an important goal (recognition), and a celebration that draws families together in a shared social experience (connection).

Moments of insight can come from an intensely painful experience. I heard the story told by a highly successful leader who recounted a childhood marked by an alcoholic and abusive father. The realization that this was a problem that had been passed down from his grandfather and great grandfather led him to a moment of decision. He vowed that this terrible family legacy was going to stop with him, and he was going to be a different kind of father and husband. Thirty years later the fruit of this promise continues in his children and grandchildren.

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It would appear that these moments of enlightenment include a pivot of sorts, stepping away from the pain and regret to ask an important question. How can I turn this impactful moment into something positive that may make me a better person? There are many examples of defining moments becoming turning points in a person's life trajectory. Often these turning points have a spiritual dimension.

The Apostle Paul experienced a defining moment in his conversion on the Damascus road when he was struck blind and heard the voice of Jesus. This moment did not lead to an easy and comfortable life. In 2 Corinthians he recounts being beaten and stoned, shipwrecked and adrift at sea, death threats, hunger and thirst, and being exposed to the elements. In spite of all of these hardships, he persevered in his new calling because he was a permanently changed man.

Defining moments can also be intensely positive. Literally every successful person I know has a teacher or mentor story that is highlighted as the key to their personal and professional achievements. Hearing someone tell you that they believe in you and expect great things in the future has the power to sustain a person through many of life's disappointments and challenges.

How do the defining moments of our life story affect the kind of leader that we become? In the book **Geeks and Geezers**, Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas describe what they call the Crucibles of Leadership - difficult situations that help to develop key leadership skills. They particularly identify a trait they call "adaptive capacity" as a key to leadership success. They observe that "People with ample adaptive capacity may struggle with the crucibles they encounter, but they



don't become stuck or defined by them. They learn important lessons, including new skills that allow them to move on to new levels of achievement and new levels of learning." While everyone has defining moments in life, it appears that how we respond to these defining moments is the key to being a successful leader.

Secondly, leaders have frequent opportunities to be part of a defining moment in the life of another person. Giving someone your undivided time and attention teaching or just patiently listening, offering genuine words of praise and recognition for a job well done, encouraging someone who is going through a particularly hard time, or providing a balanced perspective to someone with less life experience are just a few ways leaders can have a great impact on the future.

Leaders can also play a key role in helping their entire team become closer and learn something positive from a work experience. Reminding them of the sacredness that can be found in serving others well and how their work makes the world a better place can create a level of satisfaction that makes it easier to get up and come to work in the morning.

Finally, defining moments are often found in unlikely places. Several years ago I wrote a piece about connecting with my son in the quiet moments

spent fishing. Later, when my Dad read it, he thought I had written it about our times fishing together as adults. An experience that may seem rather pedestrian to others can be incredibly important in building and sustaining relationships.

Fishing Lines

"Got a bite Dad?"

"Just a bump, nothing on the line."

"Seems like we have been around here Quite a little time."

"A little slow, I must admit; You never know just when The fish that we are waiting for Will come along again."

*And so the conversation goes;
Small talk by the hour.
But tucked between the words and silence
Loaded with the power
Of life and love and meaning
Of past and future dreams;
Waiting for the fish to come
And interrupt the scene.*

*I talk of what has value.
Of lessons I have learned.
He talks of situations
Deciding where to turn.
In years ahead when life unfolds,
The turning of a page,
I hope he asks for my advice,
Believing I'm a sage.*

*Returning empty handed,
Mom thinks our luck was bad.
But the day was worth the trip;
Fishing lines with Dad.*

Blessings,

