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Crucibles

When heated directly by fire, the fire of trial, the heat of disease,
Infernos of grief and penury . . .
Can we hold under the terror, the torment of transforming, under forging,
Until we are bearers of light, torches, for sufferance, for illumining oblivion?
—Susan Deborah King, from “Crucible,” in *One-Breasted Woman*

Chapter 1 introduced the central notion that “we are largely the stories we tell about ourselves.” In Chapter 2, we asked you to practice some “projective hindsight” to imagine how you might lose your way in hopes that, in fact, you wouldn’t “lose it,” but rather “find it” and increase the chances that you’ll stay on course. Here, we ask you to return to your life story, this time scanning it for particularly salient experiences that seem heavily laden with meaning. We call these crucibles.

Life is chock-full of potentially rich developmental experiences. But not all of it. In fact, most of our waking hours are pretty boring. Our challenge here is to identify those times that seem most interesting and squeeze them for all they’re worth. As you embark on this chapter in your journey toward authentic leadership, consider the following two questions:

- What events, relationships, or periods in your life have had the greatest impact on who you are?
- What did you learn from these crucibles?

It can be hard to gain insight and learn from periods of productive ferment, difficulties, and challenges when we are in the midst of them. Yet it is often during

the most difficult times that we have the opportunity to confront who we are at the deepest level and realize what our lives and our leadership are all about.

CRUCIBLES

In their book *Geeks and Geezers*, authors Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas describe crucibles as intense experiences that test us to our very limits. Crucibles force us to look at ourselves, examine our character and values in a new light, and come to grips with who we really are. "The skills required to conquer adversity and emerge stronger and more committed than ever," they conclude, "are the same ones that make for extraordinary leaders."

Many crucibles involve pain and loss. Examples from your professional life might include confronting a difficult challenge at work, receiving critical feedback, getting passed over for promotion, or losing a job. Experiencing a divorce, illness, or death of a loved one are examples of highly consequential events in our personal lives that often qualify as potential crucibles.

To a chemist, a crucible is a vessel in which substances are heated to high temperatures in order to trigger a chemical transformation, as in the case of the refinement of gold ore or a steel refinery's blast furnace. The crucible is an ancient technology and has yielded rich literary references over time, ranging from the refiner's fire of the Old Testament prophets, to the metaphor and techniques of alchemists, to Arthur Miller's play about the Salem Witch Trials, *The Crucible*.

While often painful, crucibles don't necessarily have to be negative events. Getting accepted into a prestigious school, winning a big game or competition, or truly leading for the first time are all significant experiences with the potential to fundamentally shape who we are. Particularly powerful relationships with mentors, elders, or personal heroes can also play an important role in our development. These too might qualify as a crucible. Any event or period of your life that forces deep self-reflection, that causes you to question your most basic assumptions, values, and worldview, has the potential to qualify as a crucible.

Shortly after the end of the 2004 college basketball season, Duke University's legendary men's basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski (aka: Coach K) unexpectedly faced one of the most important decisions of his life. The Los Angeles franchise of the National Basketball Association offered Coach K a five-year, \$40 million contract to leave his beloved Blue Devils to coach the Lakers. On the surface, receiving such a lucrative offer appears completely different from being fired, suffering through a major illness, or losing a loved one. And yet, this was perhaps the most significant crucible of his professional career. At the age of 57, receiving such an unexpected and attractive offer forced Coach K to reflect deeply on some very serious questions: What's really important to me? What are my core values? Where do my loyalties lie? What's my real purpose in life? His answer: "I passionately want to coach and teach . . . and your heart has to be in whatever you lead . . . Duke has always taken up my whole heart. And no matter how good some other option was, to lead my Duke team with all my heart could only happen at this place." Coach K remained at Duke. More dedicated than ever, he earned his 1,000th victory in January of 2015, solidifying his position as the coach with most wins in Division I men's basketball history.

As you scan your life for potential crucibles, be playful. Think broadly. For some, the task of identifying a crucible comes easily. One single, searing moment in their lives seems to define who they are and how they lead. For others, this work can be more difficult, the process more complex, their crucibles more nuanced. Are there any places in your life that you keep revisiting? Events or episodes that seem to hold your attention? These are crucible-rich zip codes, ripe for re-visiting to explore for important lessons.

Many of us can't point to one single, dramatic event that seems worthy of the label. That's okay; don't force it. Relax your criteria. Instead of a single event, your crucible might be an extended period of minor challenges that resulted in an important shift or reframing of yourself or your place in the world. It could also be a series of events over time that reveals an important pattern in your life. Who knows? You might be in the middle of an important crucible right now.

Don't worry if your crucible doesn't seem to fit the formal definition. Don't worry if your life seems largely blessed, if you haven't experienced any dramatic hardships, trauma, or crises worthy of a good novel. This exercise is not about unleashing your competitive

juices to see who has lived the most challenging life. It's simply designed to ensure that you squeeze as much learning out of the rock that is your life story. It's as simple (and hard) as that. Let's try it!

POTENTIAL CRUCIBLES

As you scan your life story, what events, relationships, or periods of your life have had the greatest impact on who you are? Start by searching for potential crucibles. For example: My parents divorced when I was eight years old; I was elected president of my high school class; I was passed over for promotion; I was cut from the JV basketball team; my partner of six years just broke up with me; when I was 12, my parents sent me from China to live in the United States with my grandparents and I didn't speak any English; I wasn't very popular in high school or college; one of my children has no respect for me; I have the chance to start my own company, but I also have an offer to return to a prestigious consulting firm; my boss screamed at me in an important meeting with a client; I am in love with a person from outside my faith; I spent three years in financial services and hated it, but loved the money; my father is dying; I just started in my first real leadership position, and I'm not sure that I can do this.

EXERCISE 3.1: POTENTIAL CRUCIBLES

List at least three to five potential crucibles:

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Your Greatest Crucible. Now, try to identify the single, most salient, and consequential experience of your life. If you had to point to just one life-defining event, which one would it be? Which one of the potential crucibles listed above seems to hold the most meaning for you? Identify your greatest crucible with an *asterisk* next to it (above).

Pattern of Crucibles. If, upon reflection, no one single experience rises to the level of feeling particularly life defining or extraordinarily salient, then look for a pattern of crucibles in your life. Can you identify a significant theme or common thread that seems to flow through your life story, one that seems to define who you are? If you can, how would you describe this pattern?

Multiple Crucibles. For this exercise, it's important to work really hard at identifying a single greatest crucible or discerning a central pattern. Don't give up too easily on either of these drills. After some effort though, if selecting a greatest crucible simply doesn't feel right and no clear pattern emerges, then simply hang onto your original list of potential crucibles. You'll need them for the next part of this exercise.

THE STORY OF YOUR CRUCIBLE

It's time to write the story of your crucible. Whether it's based on a single event, a pattern of experiences, or a list of important stories, the very practice of writing it down—putting it out there—is an essential step in the learning process. You might be thinking, "I can skip this step. I've done the reflection, but writing is hard. Can't I get the benefit of this exercise without having to write it down?" The short answer is, "No."

Reflection is important; however, until we write it down, we don't really get it. The very discipline of writing infuses a level of clarity into our understanding that simply doesn't exist until we get it down on paper. Writing also injects some much-needed space between our experiences and ourselves. Until we write about them, in a sense, our experiences "have us." The very act of writing shifts the locus of agency and control; putting our lives "out there" allows us to "have them." Gaining some distance from our stories, from ourselves, can be very liberating. Writing our stories in this unique format—as crucibles—also allows us to more easily and powerfully share ourselves with others.

What did you learn about yourself?

In general, how do you tend to respond to adversity?

What resources did you call upon to help get through this crucible?

Our lives are chock-full of potential developmental experiences. Not all of them rise to the significance of a crucible. However, the general process of identifying, reflecting, and learning from them is largely the same as the one you've practiced here. In Part Two, "Discover Your Authentic Leadership," you'll apply this same discipline to increase your level of self-awareness in several critical areas of development.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- There are a few particularly salient events, relationships, or periods in our lives that have a disproportionate impact on who we are and how we lead. We call these crucibles.
- Identifying, reflecting, and writing about these experiences is an important process in discovering our True North.
- Understanding how we respond to life's crucibles is important to understanding how we grow and develop.