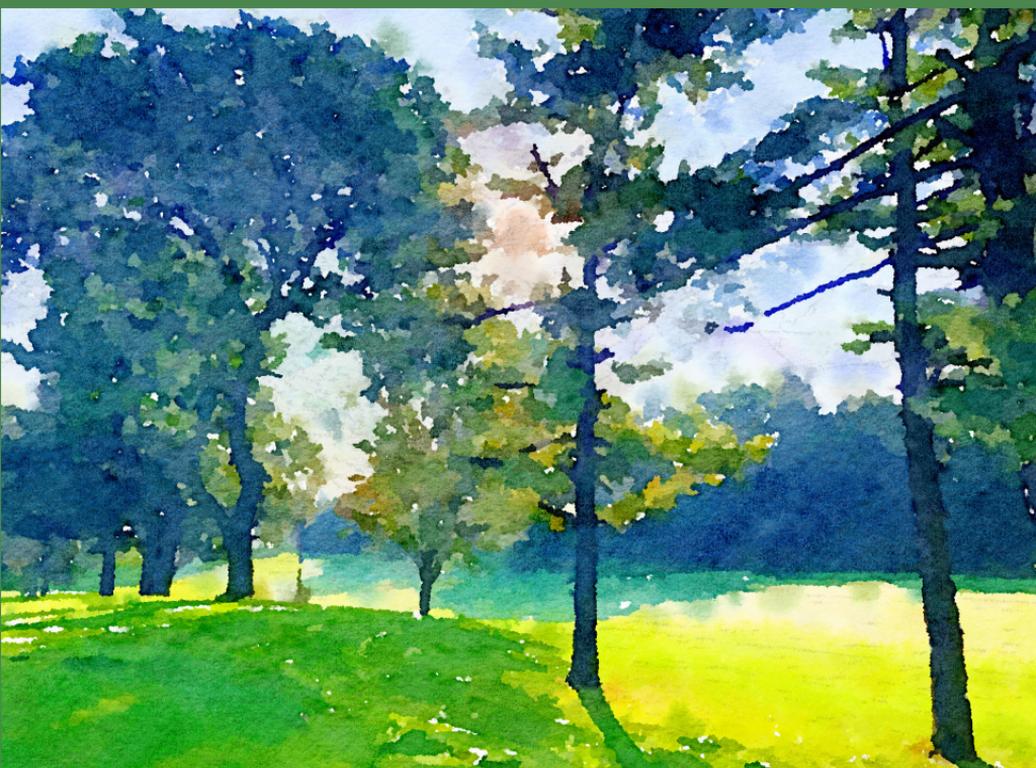


grace *notes*

Leading in an Upside-Down World



JOHN BALDONI

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PROLOGUE

Because of Covid.

It's a phrase we heard a lot and with good reason.

Because of Covid we coped with a health crisis that has disrupted our workforce.

Caused millions to lose their jobs.

And many jobs did not come back in their current form.

Our life was turned upside down.

Because of Covid is also a signal that we have learned.

We endured this crisis.

Despite not knowing when it would end.

But because of Covid we learned new lessons about ourselves.

We have strengths. We have resilience.

We have opportunities.

We have one another.

In many ways, we've pared our lives down to what's essential.

Our loved ones, our families, our friends, our colleagues.

Because of Covid.

While there is much to mourn, and much to fear, in our current world.

There are also new learnings, new opportunities... because of Covid.

It is said that when the British Army marched off the battlefield of Yorktown, a band played a drinking song called “The World Turned Upside Down.”

True or not, the sentiment of the song rang true.

On both land and sea, the mightiest military had been defeated after an eight-year struggle with an upstart confederation of colonies (albeit with France’s support) fielding an army that lacked the training, discipline, and weaponry of the more superior British force.

The fact that Britain could surrender a colony such as America was truly earth-shattering.

This story resonates with me looking back at 2020. The year turned upside down with the rapid spread of Covid-19, a pernicious virus that could infect and leave unaffected, or infect and kill. Resulting from the shutdown was an economic slowdown that threw millions out of work and hobbled our economy.

If that were not enough, the succession of killings of unarmed Blacks by white police officers became the catalyst for a massive movement for social change after the strangulation of George Floyd. Protests arced the nation and the world. Political discord fueled by conspiracy theories further added to our national divide. Adding to the misery were more hurricanes in the Southeast and forest firestorms in California.

Throughout the year, I created a series of short videos about the challenges facing leaders. The videos explored the emotions leaders were feeling and made suggestions for better serving their teams, their organizations, and themselves.

These thoughts are now collected in this book, *Grace Notes: Leading in an Upside-Down World*. The themes covered are fear, isolation, and anxiety and how we can overcome them with greater purpose and more joy.

The idea of *Grace Notes* dovetails with my interest in music. A grace note can be ornamentation or flourish. It may also serve as an “excuse” for misplaying a note—something I am very prone to do. In jazz, grace notes are what give the harmonies their unique sound, one that is spirited and unexpected. And in times of crisis, leaders become like jazz musicians, improvising as they proceed and making it look easy... as well as graceful.

While no one will want to relive 2020, what we learned in that terrible year will make us better—more resolute, more resilient, more compassionate. It was also a year of “grace notes,” women and men from every walk of life reaching out and helping others.

This book unfolds differently than my other works. My intention is to let each piece speak for itself, that is, reflect the emotion of the moment. Within the flow of the book there is an arc from darkness to light but the progress, like life itself, is not linear. Ups and downs, high and lows, all trend toward the light, though not in a straight line, toward a new understanding of ourselves and our world.

While the messages contained here occurred in a terrible year, the lessons they taught us are lasting and applicable for years to come. I hope you find this collection of value in your leadership journey as you create your own “new normal” for now and for your future.



I.

GRACE UNDER PRESSURE

Grace under pressure.

When I hear that phrase, what comes to mind is the five-alarm fire.

There's a lot of heat. There's a lot of noise.

And a lot of people scrambling around.

But if you look closely among fire and rescue trucks,

you'll notice a fire battalion chief,

with a very composed and collected demeanor, calmly giving directions.

Grace Under Pressure.

Grace Under Pressure requires meeting

Anger with composure.

Denigration with respect.

Sadness with compassion.

Scarcity with abundance.

Insults with smiles.

Selfishness with selflessness.

Hoarding with generosity.

Life with gratitude.

Today everyone is looking for a leader who can exhibit

Grace Under Pressure.

Be collected. Be calm. Be composed.

This is someone that others can look up to be trusted.

Grace Under Pressure.

When the heat is on, good leaders step forward.

They demonstrate that they have what it takes to deal with the pressure.

They bring others along with them.

Grace Under Pressure.

DEALING WITH FEAR

We all feel fear from time to time.
And with good reason, mostly.
And so that presents a particular challenge
for those in positions of authority.
How do they navigate the landscape of fear?

The bottom line is they don't show fear.
They may feel it, but you don't show it.
You radiate calmness. You radiate confidence.
It doesn't come from arrogance.
It comes from a sense of caring for another person.
I want to be the go-to person for my people.
I want them to trust me.
That begins with radiating a sense of calmness about this situation,
that things will work out if we work together.

DISPLACEMENT

You are displaced from your place of work.
And for the first day or so, maybe that feels like,
“Hey, I can work from home.”
But over time, you realize that you're working in isolation,
and that can be an unsettling proposition.

It is essential to have confidence in yourself.
If you were doing an excellent job in the office,
and you're following the task that your boss assigned you,
likely you're moving in the right direction.
Take heart. Stay close to your colleagues.
Seek feedback from your boss.
Do the best you can in the time that you have to do it.

HAVE CONFIDENCE IN YOURSELF

Confidence! Where does it come from?

It comes from your accomplishments, your achievements.

When you encounter something new,
confidence gives you that ability to muscle through.

But let's be honest.

Now we're in the middle of a pandemic and an economic crisis.

Who's been through that before?

No one that I know of.

But at the same time,

leaders who might be feeling a little less confident

—and that's not necessarily a bad thing—

need to take heart.

Trust your ability to pull your people through this crisis.

Trust what you can do.

And delegate authority and responsibility to those around you...
whom you know can excel.

This is an overwhelming crisis.

You will be judged by the decisions you make now...

and the actions you take as you follow through.

Trust your instincts.

Rely on your good people.

And you will succeed.

That will give you confidence as you go forward.

COPING WITH STRESS

I think all of us are feeling stress.
 And that recognition is essential to coping with stress,
 knowing that you're in the same boat with everyone else.
 There are ways to reduce stress by focusing on your breath.
 Breathe from your diaphragm, in and out regularly.
 Breathe in through your nose.
 Exhale through your mouth.
 That will lessen the stress you're feeling.

Talk about stress, too
 Get with trusted colleagues and talk about how you're feeling.
 Share your thoughts.
 Ideally, you'll come up with solutions that work for you, and maybe for
 others too.
 It is helpful to recognize that stress is a natural reaction to uncertainty.
 Acknowledge it.
 Resolve to yourself that you will get better.
 And if you feel you need to talk to a professional about it,
 please reach out.
 There's no stigma to feeling stress or anxiety, certainly not now.
 There are lots of good people willing to help you.
 All you have to do is ask.

BELIEVE IN YOU

In the tough times, it's pretty easy to become discouraged.
 And that's human.
 It shows that you have accepted reality.
 And it's okay to cry.

Go outside and yell at the wind if you have to...
 but eventually, you need to cope with what's going on.
 There's a beautiful Japanese saying that says,
 "Fall down seven times. Get up eight."

What that thought gets to is a concept called resilience.
All great leaders have been tested by their times.
The good ones—the ones we remember—overcame the adversity...
both personal and organizational.
They came out positively on the other side.
We, too, can do that.
Have faith in yourself.

TAKE TIME TO DELIBERATE

A colleague who was talking about how she wasn't quite ready to jump into the fray,
and determine what to do differently in the wake of this pandemic crisis.
As we were talking, I realized that,
while some people are already jumping in with both feet,
and thinking of new business models and new ways to connect with others,
some of us just need time.
You need time to process, and that's not a negative.
However, you react to the crisis, thinking and reflecting is positive.
Don't beat yourself up,
if you don't have a great solution to whatever is going on immediately.
Take your time.
Answers will come to you.

GRIEF

There is a topic we get too comfortable avoiding.

Loss!

Some people have lost a loved one.

And the grief they feel is real.

It's hurtful. It's painful. And that's normal.

For the rest of us, we have lost our way of work...

as well as our way of socializing with our friends.

That's a loss too. And it is okay to feel sad about it.

We owe it to ourselves to acknowledge this loss

and to process it in ways that are best for us.

If you're feeling isolated,

and feel you don't have anyone to talk to

reach out to mental health experts in your area.

Many are willing to listen.

Some of us can get by talking to friends... just talking out the issues.

It is good to connect with others.

Yes, we have loss.

But know that other people are there for you.

NEED FOR HUMILITY

I was listening to some commentary,

and a woman said that ours was a time for humility.

How right she is.

As we face this crisis, we know that it's greater than us.

A sense of humility allows us to look inward,

to see our own strengths as well as our weaknesses.

But also uncover ways forward.

Leaders must do what they can to assure their people
that they're doing what they can to make things better.

Everything won't be alright.

We are likely to be changed forever.

But in a way, it's a reminder of our humanity,

to be humble in the time of crisis.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

In times of crisis, people get tired, very tired.

Leaders, too, get tired.

You want to do the best for your teams.

You are outward directed, which is good.

But don't forget yourself.

Your role is to be the best you can, of course.

But you can't be your best if you are too physically tired,
or mentally tired, to take care of your team.

Make some time for yourself.

Some of you may enjoy meditation and mindfulness.

Those kinds of things rejuvenate the spirit.

But also take time for family, of course.

Take time for friends.

Exercise, eat right... all of these things.

Self-care is essential for a leader.

Don't neglect yourself.

Because if you neglect yourself, you can't be at your best for others.

ANXIETY IN TROUBLED TIMES

Anxiety.

There's a lot of it and with good reason.

We are living in an upside-down world.

There is very little clarity about what's going to happen next.

We are in the grips of what is probably the biggest crisis that any of us have faced in our lives.

It is intimidating. It is natural to feel fearful and anxious.

Leaders must know when people are feeling anxious.

Give them permission to express it.

And to even own it.

Sometimes anxiety can be clinical.

And those instances you need professional help...

and there should be no shame in that.

Other times anxiety is just the feeling of unease that we feel.

It's important to acknowledge the subject.

Talk about it.

Provide help to those who need it.

But most importantly, realize that anxiety is a human reaction to uncertainty.

And as such, it's part of where we are in our world.

BE THE OPTIMIST

Half empty or half full?

If you're in leadership, you have to opt for half-full.

Leaders must look on the bright side of life.

You can say, Well, wait a minute.

We're in a world right now, which is coming apart.

The economy is in shambles.

We're fighting a deadly virus.

And we're torn apart by racial injustice.

What is there to be optimistic about?

That's a good question, and that's where it falls to leadership.
 You have to be that person that rallies your people together.
 Leaders who deal in optimism are not Pollyannas.

No, they are realists.

They look at the good side of life.

They realize, and they believe,
 that there's probably more good than there is evil.

And they celebrate the right things, the kindness around us,
 the good news stories.

But they also look inside the organization
 to find out who's doing good things.

Who's achieving the metrics?

Who's helping others?

What teams are succeeding?

Find the optimism,

and you will find a reason to persevere.

NEXT FOR ME

Do I want to devote the rest of my life to what I'm doing now?

Or do I want to do something different?

These feelings are natural... and actually not unexpected.

But also they could be opportunities to re-think where you are now.

If you've had a successful career,

but you're looking for a new opportunity.

Or, if you've been stalled in your career where you are now,

and want to consider something different,

then this is an opportunity to reconsider.

There may not be that many jobs out there in the immediate future.

But when the situation changes,

consider new opportunities for yourself.

It may involve going back to school.

It may be looking for a new employer.

There are all kinds of things to consider.

So take heart.

LET'S BUILD TRUST

How does a leader earn trust?

Be transparent.

Share the information that you have.

Communicate clearly and consistently.

And part of that communication means you listen
and act on what you learn.

And part of that acting means you are decisive.

When a decision needs to be made, make it.

Finally, leaders need to hold themselves accountable.

And doing this, they set the example for others to follow.

In general, what trust does is promote a more caring
and more concerned culture.

And boy, do we need that right now!

Leaders need to pick up the slack where they can...

and make people feel that they're part of the organization.

Contributing, collaborating and belonging.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

If you're in leadership, reach out to people in your company,
and find out what they would like to do differently.

What could we stop doing?

What could we do differently?

What could we do to make our company, our organization, more
strong and more resilient?

The future will be daunting.

But with the collective knowledge

and cooperation and collaboration of everyone on the team,
and everyone in the organization, we will succeed.

It is a leader's job to find out what people are thinking.

Challenge them to think.

We will make it.

RECHARGE & RENEW

Coaching, I like to say, is “Me Time.”

Coming to an understanding of yourself by focusing on yourself.

Now more than ever we all need some “Me Time.”

With this “Me Time.” we can do one or two different things.

The first is to recharge ourselves.

We do this by connecting with people.

We can do it virtually.

Or we can do it with our loved ones with whom we’re sheltered.

We also can recharge ourselves with exercise and recreation.

But there’s another, perhaps more significant, opportunity—renewal.

Finding a new outlook on how you view life.

With the great challenges we’re facing,
we are redefining the way we go to work.

We’re also redefining the way we connect with other people.

Indeed, this is a time to begin again.

Recharge and renew.

SACRIFICE

Sacrifice is a word we don’t often hear in times of abundance.

Now, in a time of scarcity, as we are all hunkered down,
sacrifice becomes a big issue that we talk about.

The challenge for all of us is to make our sacrifice worth it.

Whatever we’re giving up — at minimum, we’ve given up our mobility.

We’re staying in our domicile, so we don’t pass the virus on to others.

Our challenge is to make our sacrifice, whatever it is, worth it.

So that we create a better tomorrow, something worth our sacrifice.

ISOLATION

There is a lot of loneliness going around.

Because people are not getting around.

How does a leader stay connected?

Virtual communications, sure.

But how about picking up the phone to have a conversation,
not about work?

“Hey, how are you doing?”

“How are things for you?”

“Anything I can do for you?”

Reaching out like that proves that you’re a boss who cares about
that person as an individual and as a contributor.