

Your Leadership Moment

Democratizing Leadership in an Age of Authoritarianism
by Eric R. Martin

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For the unseen.

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Start Close In

*Start close in,
don't take
the second step
or the third,
start with the first
thing
close in,
the step
you don't
want to take.*

Start with
the ground
you know,
the pale ground
beneath your feet,
your own
way to begin
the conversation.

Start with your own
question,
give up on other
people's questions,
don't let them
smother something
simple.

To hear
another's voice,
follow
your own voice,

wait until
that voice
becomes an
intimate
private ear
that can
really listen
to another.

Start right now
take a small step
you can call your own
don't follow
someone else's
heroics, be humble
and focused,
start close in,
don't mistake
that other
for your own.

*Start close in,
don't take
the second step
or the third,
start with the first
thing
close in,
the step
you don't
want to take*

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Introduction: Standing in the Heat

We hope for better things; it will arise from the ashes.

— Motto of the City of Detroit, 1805

Some houses are known as firefighter killers. Dilapidated interior staircases and door frames, weakened from years of neglect or vacancy, combine with the brick exterior distinctive of homes from Detroit's gilded age to create unpredictable oven-like conditions. A firefighter from my old neighborhood once told me about his narrow escape from one of these killers. The campfire flames we were huddled around flickered across his face, reaching up to light the fresh cigarette dangling beneath his mustache.

"I was new to the job," he began, "one of my first runs (fires). A single-family home. I was charging down the hallway. Pitch black. Thick smoke everywhere. Completely surrounded by fire. Suddenly, someone grabbed me from behind, yelling 'Get out!' Before I knew it, I was midair flying out of the front of the house. I found myself lying on the muddy, tangled grass puking up smoke."

Now, here's a story I haven't heard before, I thought to myself. If you've hung around firefighters much, you can recite from memory whole repertoires of their stories, replete with long pauses and emphatic hand gestures.

"Then I saw three more firefighters flying out the front door," he continued, the wrinkles around his eyes betraying a fondness firefighters often felt toward my dad. "And behind them, Sergeant Martin. Your dad, the fire still raging behind him, tossing us out one by one before the fire took us all. That's the day I learned what firefighting is all about." The real work of a firefighter is not just putting out fires—it

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is to serve and protect people from harm, including, sometimes, protecting the protectors.

That fire was one of three hundred in the city of Detroit that night. One of eight hundred that weekend. One of 22,000 that year, 1984—the year when Detroit earned distinction as the “arson capital of the world.” Some of the fires were indeed arsons—people burning for kicks, or for insurance money, or to clear abandoned property. But not all. Cold winters and poverty combined with ill-maintained electric heaters in accidental fires. Though, “accidental” is a misleading word. In fact, the fires were the natural, unfortunate result of economically destitute Detroiters trying to live as best they could behind boarded-up windows, with no electricity, heat, or water and only a firepit to keep them warm.

To this day, the old-timers say my dad, Roger Martin, was one of the best firefighters the city of Detroit ever knew. A legend. A leader. For his fellow firefighters, he provided everything people expect from their leaders. Show them where to go—into the fire or out, up to the roof or down to the basement. Give them a clear job to do. Keep them safe. And know your stuff. Only later did I learn that these things have little to do with leadership. I also knew very little back then of my father’s reputation as a fist-fighter, not just a firefighter...and as a drinker.

My days were like those of every other kid growing up in the city. Wake up, walk to school and stay out of trouble. On mornings when Dad arrived home from the firehouse, the city’s decay wafted into my bedroom in the form of the sweet scent of firetruck diesel and smoke from the previous night’s fires. It drew me half-asleep and blurry eyed toward the thoroughly spent but satisfied man seated at the kitchen table, coffee in hand along with the day’s newspaper and his trusted crossword puzzle book. I’d shuffle slowly toward his silhouette for my morning hug—backlit by the

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fiery sun rising through our kitchen window. “I love you,” I’d say, to which he always responded playfully, “Not as much as I love you.”

Other than the smoke and diesel, it’s the stories I remember the most. Stories like the one I heard around that campfire. Stories that he and others told about raging, routine fires and predictable, near-death experiences. Stories about fellow firefighters — Black, brown, and white — storming the blazing homes of Detroit’s Eastside where I grew up. Setting aside Detroit’s fiery racism, if only momentarily, they got the work done and stayed alive while doing it. Many of the stories were horrific. But they were always punctuated with laughter — the coping kind of laughter in the arsenal of every first responder — and with a strong sense of brotherhood.

Detroit’s motto, *Speramus meliora; resurget cineribus* translates to “We hope for better things; it shall arise from the ashes.” It dates to 1805, when a great fire burned most of the city to the ground. Father Gabriel Richard, a French Roman Catholic priest, wrote these words in the hope that the city would rebuild. It reflected the spirit and resilience of the people, as well as a resolve that lives to this day. In the 215 years since, Detroit has undergone a tumultuous rise and decline. After peaking at the height of the auto industry in the 1960s, the city struggled with a shrinking population, dwindling tax base and, ultimately, bankruptcy.

But Detroit was broken long before it went broke. It had been broken my whole life — a reality I was born into, learned to lament, but seldom questioned. It was a city with rising tensions between white residents and Black residents, who were often blamed for the arsons. Generations of redlining and racial hostility poisoned the city’s well of progress. Riots. “White flight.” Industry collapse. Corruption. Crime. We had it all.

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Walking to and from school every day, I occasionally took note of street after street of unfolding neighborhood decay. Liquor stores sold alcohol to children, drug addicts, and prostitutes alike. Kids with nobody to watch them at home frequented fast food joints bent on cultivating deadly lifelong eating habits. Houses stood abandoned on every block, including eventually my own house. At one point, over 50,000 buildings stood vacant—about 1 out of every 5 buildings in the city. These vacant buildings, unwatched and unsecured, bred crime, vice, and devastating fires.

"The reason we put out fires," I've heard firefighters say, "is you're two feet away from someone's whole life. Firefighters see themselves as being on the front lines with every blaze. If they don't stop it, an entire street might burn." Yet the fires kept burning, day after day, year after year, until it just became a way of life that few of us questioned. Left unaddressed, ignored or denied, the underlying causes of the fires stole the lives, livelihoods and sense of dignity of us all. It's funny how a place can go south right before your eyes and you just don't see it.

Not until I moved away, far away, from Detroit could I apprehend how far the city had fallen over the course of my lifetime. The descent was so gradual it was easy to miss. It was also easy to overlook the many false solutions that we white residents glommed onto to stymie the decay—politicians who promised to "get tough" on crime, neighbors who quietly pressured each other not to sell their homes to "the Blacks" even as housing prices tanked, denial that somehow our own racism was part of the problem. There was also plain old it's-not-my-problem apathy. "Just let the whole damned city burn down. Let the houses burn," they'd say. "Let them [the Blacks] have it." Clearly, that wasn't the answer either. But what was the answer?

More to the point, what was the problem and why didn't we have the courage to engage in it? Why weren't we able to see how our own racism as whites contributed

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to some of our fellow Detroiters having no option but to warm themselves with open fires in the basements of abandoned homes that set ablaze the hatred in firefighters' hearts? It's a vicious cycle that I've seen often in my work with organizations and communities alike. You think you're solving the problem, but only making it worse. Most of the time, however, the challenge was simply to stay alive. Blacks and whites alike. Residents and firefighters.

Strangely enough, the thought that Dad could die in the line of duty crossed my mind only once. That was when I saw the hole traced by a bullet clean through the brick façade of the Engine 18 firehouse where he spent most of his days. It exited six inches above his wireframe headboard in the upstairs barracks. The white firefighters blamed the Black Detroiters, as they always did, even while sharing meals together with their fellow Black firefighters. But the Black firefighters and the neighborhood residents knew that one of the real culprits was racism in its many brutal, though sometimes subtle, forms that crippled us from coming together.

Meanwhile, far above the neighborhood, race-laced, political bullets were exchanged daily between the Fire Department and the Mayor's Office. The result was chronically understaffed and decommissioned firehouses. The otherwise routine and critical work of firefighting grew more difficult each year. We all grew increasingly unsafe in our own homes and in our own skin.

Whose job is it to lead change under these kinds of conditions? When the problems and solutions loom larger and far bigger than you. When your usual way of dealing with problems—your own version of putting out fires at work or in your private life—no longer suffices. When the people around you have accepted a less than optimal reality but won't listen to reason. When the very people who are the problem also need to be part of the solution—if only they could be mobilized to see their own

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capacity to lead. Had I known the answer then like I know it now, Dad might still be alive.

Maybe I could've helped the city fix the conditions that caused people like my dad to turn to alcohol to numb the pain of living in decay. Probably not though, because the fires were a symptom of a decaying city, itself the symptom of a dying automotive industry, an eroding American middle-class and growing economic inequity worldwide. Something else surely would've gotten him like it did so many other Detroiters. In the end, the legend that was Dad died, not in a fire, but withered away by alcohol. It took a lot to kill him. Alcohol did what three near-death "firefighter killers," three bouts of cancer, Vietnam, and a lifetime of risk-taking couldn't do.

When something is so every day to a child, they don't necessarily question it. So it was for me. The city's decline, the decline of Dad's health—both happening over decades—combined with declining home values to create a hopelessness that permeated my entire childhood.

As the fires burned and as I got older, I longed for some smart person somewhere with power and know-how to fix our situation. Our mothers, our fathers, our elected officials, our President. Anyone. Had an authoritarian figure appeared with an "I'll fix it" arrogance, seductive ideas to wall us off from the reality the automotive industry faced, they would've had my vote. It was probably this desire for straightforward answers that drove me to study engineering. My hope was to fix all the wrongs with just a bit more smarts and perhaps an innovative, technical fix of some kind.

Had I known instead that tackling this problem meant we'd all have to face our own contribution to the mess. That we'd have to change our own behavior. That we'd have to wean ourselves off the automotive industry and the oil addiction it created, that

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we'd have to face the threat headlong. If anyone had the courage to seize these moments for leadership, I know in my heart dad would be alive now. Old but strong, and hugging his grandchildren, cup of coffee and crossword book still at hand.

My life's work and Your Leadership Moment are dedicated to helping people lead change against all odds. My experience and deep belief is that anyone, anywhere, can lead change to improve their livelihood, their community or their organization. Over the past twenty years, I've come to know many Roger Martins, their daughters, their sons, their colleagues—in cities worldwide, in Appalachia, in the slums of Delhi and Nairobi, in Google and major philanthropic organizations and even in the White House. People—mostly good people—putting out fires as best they can, yet often solving the wrong problems perfectly.

I've also seen some of these people rise above the fray. They've exercised leadership and successfully tackled the deeper unaddressed challenges within their teams, within their communities, and within themselves. None of them are leaders in the conventional sense. Few have achieved worldwide fame. Yet each of them is mobilizing others day in and day out to tackle seemingly intractable and impossible challenges. Stories about their acts of leadership are the ones I tell my own children. Stories like these are also ones that I know every person can be a part of through their own leadership moments.

Through these stories, my hope is to ignite a recognition of our deep similarities despite our superficial differences. To understand how good people can be compelled to set fire to their own lives, how good people can be compelled to act in hateful ways, how places like Detroit—once the “engine of democracy”—can get it wrong for

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all the right reasons. And, despite all of this, how people can, and are, maintaining resilience and hope on the winding road to creating meaningful change. With this recognition and a practical framework for leading change, I hope we can create the leadership needed deep within our organizations and communities—not just at the top of them—to tackle the challenges afire in the world today.

Stories that seek to be in service to this must be honest. I've chosen to share certain moments and used certain language that may offend. As is the case in leadership, tough choices abounded about what to leave in, what to leave out, who to hold up, and who to call out. What's here are honest truths told with hope and love, however painful, to inspire others to step onto a new path.

As a child, there was very little I felt I could do to stop the fires, but what I did learn was to stand in the heat—and survive.

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Chapter 1: Leadership Moments

I'm tempted to believe that what we call necessary institutions are often no more than institutions to which we have grown accustomed.

— Alexis de Tocqueville

What's a Leadership Moment?

Can a person actually lead consequential change? This is the question I'm often asked by people I've worked with around the world—even from people associated with power in major corporations, philanthropic foundations, and government offices. The pursuit of this question ultimately answers itself. The answer gets to the heart of what we mean when we say *leadership*. Through much trial and experimentation, I've learned that it's most helpful to view leadership as a moment, rather than as a trait like charisma or vision, and certainly not as a person.

Leadership moments are daily opportunities anyone can take to create change. They're moments that make your heart leap with hopeful anticipation—or with fear—of taking the next step. They hold promise for that long-awaited breakthrough, or for the change you know is possible. They also hold the uncomfortable possibility that you, too, need to change. Leadership moments are grounded in the idea that leadership is something that anyone can exercise to achieve a better outcome than the one they've been offered.

You've likely already seen a leadership moment or exercised one yourself at some point. It's when a set of circumstances arise that quietly ask, or sometimes scream, for someone to take action. It's when someone takes a stand that is outside of the norm or