

The Shadow Side of Leadership

by Ingrid Richter

Ingrid is one of [CODI](#)'s Academic Co-Directors, an independent consultant, and a partner in [Threshold Associates](#).

I want to talk about confronting the shadow side with courage.

In a leadership program that I co-facilitate we ask people to reflect on what they are a “force for” in their leadership work. This means reaching deeply inside to find and name the part of us that fiercely stands up for what we believe in. It means giving voice to it, rising to meet it, embracing the power of it, and using it courageously.

When people begin to discover what they are a “force for,” they often feel vulnerable, because it is usually experiences of pain and brokenness which have given rise to their inner passion and force. There is also an enormous sense of wonder that enters the room when someone has the courage to revisit the difficult, often scarring experiences, and in the sharing there is a release of hidden, walled-in power which crackles and flares into a warmth-giving fire.

One early December afternoon, when the fields were lightly covered with snow, a group of 25 of us listened as a senior police officer in his early 40's told us about how he was a force for *certainty*.

Nearly 20 years before, he was a young, unmarried officer stationed in a remote British Columbia town. It was Christmas, and since he was single, he was on duty while the others were celebrating with their children and families. By 8.30 am he knew it would be a long day. There was nothing happening and the clock hands were moving slowly. He had been raised as a Catholic, and remembered the times he played with his mother's rosary as a child. There were moments when he felt an indefinable, but certain feeling of magic, of some larger force surrounding him. A profound, and mysterious certainty.

By 9.00 am he decided it might be a good idea to attend Mass in the town. Of course, he was greeted with great enthusiasm by those families attending, and he described what fun it was to feel the warmth of Christmas, and to play with a little girl in a purple dress sitting in the pew in front of him. But all too soon, Mass was over, and he couldn't linger any longer. The day still stretched ahead.

Not long after that, a call finally came. A serious car crash on the highway outside of town. Finally something to do. Two snowplows had been clearing the highway, and in the cascading plume of snow the oncoming car had blindly crashed head-on into a snowplow. The entire family in the car was killed. He sprang into action. This was what all his training was for. He cleared the scene, comforted the plow driver, he took measurements, did the calculations, wrote up the details. As the victims were all dead, no ambulance came, but he had to wait for the undertakers to arrive before he could go and inform the grandparents. Again time yawned as he waited alone on the empty highway in the thickly falling snow. There was a palpable silence. He glanced into the car again, and noticed that the child in the back seat was a little girl wearing a purple dress. She was holding his mother's rosary beads, which he did not remember giving to her earlier that morning.

The day still stretched ahead. After the undertakers came, he gathered up the family's Christmas gifts which had been strewn across the road, and prepared himself to take them and the news to the family's grandparents. It was not until much, much later when he noticed that one small gift had fallen between

the seats of the car. He couldn't bring himself to go back and return that last small gift. There was something inside of him that was certain he should keep it. And so he kept it, unopened, for many years. What was in it did not matter to him. What mattered was the connection between the gift, to this profound event, and the little girl in the purple dress.

As a police officer he has encountered many more long days. But this certainty of purpose, of belief in something larger is what sustains him, is what he is a force for. Since he has been promoted, he tries to teach younger officers how to preserve their feeling of certainty, help them move past fear and doubt.

And, as we heard him tell the story, we also understood how pressured he is to make change happen in his complex organization. We knew that he needed to confront his own fear and doubt again, to re-anchor himself in the magic, the certainty of something larger, more powerful, unknowable, and to feel the power of that, as a way of moving forward into new challenges.

The sharing of this story, of the many stories that I have heard in people's leadership development journeys, have moved me deeply. They have caused me to think again about the need to re-examine our broken places in order to truly discover our power and strength. It is profoundly difficult to re-visit these shadows, the experiences of loss, victimization, fear and pain. And yet, as I accompany leaders doing this work, I see how much of power is hidden there. Without the courage to re-examine our lives our true power is not accessible, and not available to ourselves and others, especially when we need to confront the dark places and difficult experiences of leading change, of walking the path towards becoming who we were intended to be.

The police officer who had us captivated and tearful at hearing his story showed his courage by surfacing and sharing his profound beliefs. He also inspired us to look within ourselves again, and not to be afraid to name that essence, that force which sustains us, which helps us to find our way, and in so doing, offers others a clearer path forward as well.

When You Get Lost

Tell me what you do
when you get lost
Tell me

Tell me what you feel
How things look to you
What happens in your head
What you say to yourself
Tell me

Can you see anything
when you get lost
Can you hear what's about you
Do you perceive life at all
Tell me

Tell me what scares you most
when you get lost
Can you draw from deep inside

What do you use to hold yourself up
Do you move yourself differently
Tell me

Tell me what you do
to reach that special calm
Can you direct a prayer
When do you know to wait
When do you know to risk
Tell me

Tell me what you do
when you get lost
Tell me

Then tell me
How you know
When you are lost
no more
Tell me.

--Carol Prejean Zippert