

1 RE MEMBER

*In the dim background of our mind, we know what we ought to be doing,
but somehow we cannot start.*

—William James

*Don't look further for answers: be the solution. You were born with
everything you need to know. Make a promise to stop getting in
the way of the blessing that you are. Take a deep breath,
remember to have fun, and begin.*

—Jonathan H. Ellerby

The first strategy for long-term effective leadership in the same place is to *remember*. Over time, memories fade, one's thinking gets cluttered, and in the midst of inevitable cycles of change leaders can lose touch with the “center” of themselves and their organizations. When that happens, work becomes a rote exercise—just showing up, doing what has always been done, rewinding the tape each morning but without the passion, purpose, or compelling vision that inspires and energizes an organization. If an individual is to genuinely revision his or her work, he or she must remember the most important and essential core elements

of the organization and of his or her role in the life of the organization. Institutional and personal memories are powerful forces when harnessed to a new vision.

When Howard Schultz, the founding president of Starbucks, returned to the position of CEO in an effort to save the company from a corporate decline, he noted, “Sometimes the earliest days of Starbucks seemed very far away. Like straining to remember the sound of your child’s voice as a toddler as he or she heads off to college, Starbucks’ nascent days got more elusive as the company grew.”¹

ARE YOU THE SINGER?

Several years ago I was asked to speak for a weekend series of services at a church in western Michigan. The music for that weekend was provided by a very fine trio of musicians—a fellow and two young ladies from a neighboring town. The meeting began with a Friday evening service, and I thought we got off to a good start. There was a large crowd in attendance, and the music was excellent. At the close of the service, I had the opportunity to greet a large number of folks from that congregation who had come to the service.

As I was standing in the foyer, a man walked up to me and asked, “Are you the singer?”

“No, I’m the speaker for the weekend.”

“Where ya from?”

“Olivet Nazarene University.”

“Oh, I had a boy went there. He never came back.”

“Hum,” I replied, not knowing what to say to that.

“Do you know where Niles is?” he asked.

“Well, more or less,” I said. “I’ve never been there, but I know in a general way where it is.”

“I have a brother who lives there,” he said.

The conversation trailed on a bit longer until another person walked up to say hello.

The following night we had another service. The trio sang; then I spoke. I lingered in the foyer to greet the people. The same fellow came up to me once again.

“Are you the singer?” he asked. As you can see, I was making quite an impression on this guy. I had spoken twice for twenty or thirty minutes each night, and he couldn’t tell the difference between me and the nice young man doing the music.

“No,” I replied. “I’m the speaker.”

“Where ya from?” he said.

“Olivet Nazarene University.”

“Oh, I had a boy went there. He never came back.”

“Hum,” I replied, still not knowing what to say to that.

“Do you know where Niles is?” he asked.

“Well, more or less,” I said.

“I have a brother who lives there,” he said.

The next morning, Sunday morning, I came to church and spoke once more and then that night, the closing night of this brief weekend meeting. I arrived a little early for the service and was seated in the pastor’s study collecting my thoughts. After a few moments, I heard the door open gently. I looked up expecting to see the pastor, who had stepped out earlier, but instead, there stood the man with whom I had talked the two nights before.

He, too, must have expected to see the pastor, for he seemed quite surprised to see me. He stared at me for a moment and, shaking his finger, said, “Are you the singer?”

I said, “No. You might want to write this down—I’m the speaker.”

“Where ya from?”

“Olivet”

“Oh, I had a boy went there—”

“Did he ever come back?” I asked.

“No, never came back,” he said.

“Do you know where Niles is?” he asked.

“Yes, I think your brother lives there, doesn’t he?”

“That’s right, I have a brother who lives there,” he said.

That experience was somewhat humorous and sad at the same time. I’m sure this individual was a wonderful gentleman whose memory had simply become impaired. It could happen to any of us.

Memory is a wonderful thing. It is upon our ability to remember that all learning rests. It is the capacity to recall that allows us to function beyond a mere stimulus-response level. Take away a person’s memory, and you take away a great deal of what it means to be a person. Such is the tragedy of Alzheimer’s disease and other forms of senility.

To remember gives us—

the ability to relive days gone by,
to recapture special moments in life,
to recall friends and family from a former day.

Memory can be stimulated by the will or by the moment. Have you had the experience of hearing a song and through that music a door of memory is opened and you recall an event when that song was playing?

TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS IN THE HOSPITAL

Robert L. Sloan spent more than twenty-seven years in the hospital, not as a patient, fortunately, but as a hospital administrator. He is the former president and chief executive officer of Sibley Memorial Hospital in Washington, D.C. He is a fine example of a leader who provided fresh, innovative, and effective leadership to a complex organization over a long period of time.

Patients and staff often remark on the friendly, personal attitude that can be instantly felt at Sibley. It's a feeling that perfectly reflects the personality of the man at the hospital's helm since 1985: a president/CEO who drives employees to work when it snows, visits patients on Thanksgiving and Christmas, and is sending personal handwritten notes to hundreds of employees saying he's grateful to have worked with them. In describing Robert Sloan, certain words surface again and again: *ethical, visionary, honest, genuine, approachable, humble.*²²

As noted, Bob began his tenure as president of Sibley in 1985. Across the years, in the midst of a constantly changing healthcare environment, he led Sibley to premier status. The hospital was recognized as the best community hospital in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area by a survey of 1,500 physicians. In recognition of his sterling leadership qualities, the District of Columbia Hospital Association established the Robert L. Sloan Leadership Award, to be presented annually to an individual demonstrating leadership qualities inspired by Bob.

One important key of Bob's continued success was his keen sense of personal and institutional memory. Across the years he never forgot who he was (his values, work ethic, faith, commitments, and professional readiness) or what the primary mission of Sibley Hospital was. This act of remembering became a constant and continual source of renewal for both him and the hospital.

During his tenure of service, the physical footprint and scope of service for Sibley was dramatically increased through new facilities and services. Under his leadership the hospital averaged greater than six-percent net operating margin each year for twenty-seven years, and the hospital's balance sheet grew from \$40 million in 1985 to \$575 million in 2012, with nine hundred days of cash-on-hand. During this same period a variety of challenges were met, and a host of creative new programs were implemented.

Through it all, employee retention rate was ninety-seven percent, and morale throughout the organization remained high.

In early 2006 Bob began to talk of “the new Sibley.” The final chapter of his service was characterized by a strong, compelling vision of what was yet to come for the hospital. He wasn’t about to *coast* his way to retirement. He remembered clearly the passion and vision that had characterized his early years at Sibley, and he renewed his conviction that the best days for his institution ought to lie just ahead. This final phase of his legacy was marked by a formal integration with the prestigious Johns Hopkins Health System and the planning for the construction of a new primary patient care tower.

In April 2012 Bob was invited to address the Interagency Institute for Federal Health Care Executives. After providing an overview of his years of service at Sibley, Bob provided his eager audience with a list of lessons learned. The list represented not only lessons learned but also lessons remembered and practiced daily. These became the hallmarks of his leadership and gave him balance and buoyancy in the cross currents of leadership. Among the list were the following:³

Hiring the best people makes all the difference. Good qualifications and experience are important, but the best people have a positive, can-do attitude, perseverance, initiative, energy, enthusiasm, commitment, and dependability. Learn how to identify those characteristics and recruit accordingly, and in turn your organization will be more successful than you can ever imagine.

Treat people as you would be treated. Every member of the organization is important. What employees do on a daily basis will either help or harm the reputation, the effectiveness, and the financial stability of the organization.

Assign your best people to the biggest opportunities.

There are many people within organizations who can handle problems; but generally there are only a few who can take advantage of the big opportunities. By identifying those people, identifying your opportunities, and matching the two together, the organization will move in a positive direction and achieve success that is meaningful.

Remember that good judgment is the most important attribute of the successful executive.

Be guided by a vision and a mission that is inspiring.

Find the nobility in the endeavor, communicate it, challenge employees with it, and reach as high as you possibly can.

Create a sense of the significant. Leaders are constantly deciding among alternatives, such as how to spend one's time and resources. Identify what is essential to the organization, and spend your time working on those things.

Concentrate on revenue growth. Be creative, innovative, and flexible.

Control expenses, monitor productivity, enforce efficiency.

Emphasize quality, outcome measurement, and personalized service.

Learn from your mistakes. Making mistakes is both a humbling and healthy experience. Every leader makes them—the secret is to correct the mistakes and move on.

Remember that success comes not so much from big victories but little victories each day.

Make decisions. Trust your judgment, and be willing to commit yourself and stake your reputation on the results. This will cause you to consider carefully and think clearly.

Listen more than you talk. The greater function is not to answer questions but to ask them. This helps to define issues and involve others.

Seek continuous improvement. Good is never good enough. We can always do better.

Caution: success will make you more vulnerable to temptation than failure ever will. Be careful when you achieve success, because temptation is lurking nearby (ethical, moral, financial).

Find good in all situations.

Take time to reflect. Having quiet time will provide needed space to gain perspective, clarity, and strength.

Realize that a thank-you from the CEO means more than you can imagine. Bob noted, “After a successful joint commission survey, I sent a personal letter to each employee. The response was surprising. It meant more than all the free meals, the desserts, and the cookies combined. Also, a brief thank-you note to one employee per week or month will mean much.”

Walk around; be visible. One almost always learns something while visiting with others in the organization. While making the rounds, be optimistic, have a sense of humor, and encourage others.

Maintain a constancy of purpose.

Respect the elderly. Talk to them, listen to them, and try to learn from them.

Keep in mind that change always takes more time than you expect.

Read a psalm or proverb daily. Psalms and Proverbs represent the wisdom of the ages. They will provide a perspective on life, a compass, a guide, a source of strength and encouragement.

Develop strong teams that will work together.

Finally, enjoy each day, for it is a gift.

Bob Sloan not only learned these lessons across the years, but he also remembered them, put them into practice, and passed them on to others.

Mr. Sloan's strong work ethic and down-to-earth attitude were shaped by an Indiana boyhood filled with chores, blue-collar jobs, family, and faith. It was while he was working his way through Olivet Nazarene College as an emergency orderly that he first heard of "hospital administration." After four years of distinguished service as a captain in the U.S. Army, including the command of a communications intercept detachment on the Thai/Cambodian border during the Vietnam War, he earned a graduate degree from George Washington University and began his career in hospital administration.⁴

To remember is a key strategy in the process of renewing one's work, organization, and life. "Every organization has a memory, a history of achievements, mistakes, and even unintended consequences that contribute to an ongoing dialogue as people mold an event's meaning for themselves. The tapestry of interpretations informs, and often directs, the organization's future."⁵

The "how" of remembering can and should take a variety of forms. Certainly there is the internal remembering that provides a constant backdrop for the thinking, reflection, and planning of the leader. But that is not enough. Remembering must also be a public exercise. Leaders must capitalize on moments when the narrative of an organization can be told and linked to the present. Strong leaders find ways to recall organizational heroes of the past.

In a recent President's Dinner speech to the faculty and staff, I devoted several paragraphs to tell the story of how during the first few years after my election as president of Olivet I had the privilege of talking at length on several occasions with Harold Reed,

who served as Olivet's president for twenty-six years, from 1949 to 1975. In the course of those conversations, he provided good, godly counsel, and he gave me several mementos of his tenure at Olivet.

One of the things he gave me was a framed three-word saying that was on the wall of his office during his years as president. It says simply, "God Is Able." In a way, that says it all, doesn't it? We don't know what the future holds, but we can have the assurance that God will enable us to respond to whatever obstacles or opportunities may come.

He also gave me his presidential medallion, which had been presented to him by the alumni association on the occasion of his inauguration in 1949. Putting that medallion on, I said, "Most of you know I have a new medallion, commissioned by the Board of Trustees during our Centennial Celebration. It is very fancy, with the names of all the former presidents engraved on it. But this one, the one I am wearing, is even more special, for it links me to the great heritage of our past and reminds me that someone else will wear it after my term of service has ended. It is a symbol of the stewardship of this office." All of this contributed to a moment of remembering.

On another occasion, in my opening remarks at the dedication of a new chapel on campus, I sought to connect that moment with both the mission of the university and those who had gone before us, saying,

Good morning and welcome. We gather in a spirit of celebration and thanksgiving to dedicate the Betty and Kenneth Hawkins Centennial Chapel and the Crawford Auditorium.

May the steel and stone of this structure bear witness to the mission of Olivet Nazarene University. Let the cross at the top of centennial tower, one hundred feet high, cast its shadow on those who live, work, and study on this campus and on all who pass by.

May the grass, trees, and flowers of these grounds speak in colorful chords of wonder and praise for the God of creation, and let the mirrored dome of heaven be a canopy of grace and blessing both day and night.

Our university “Alma Mater” says in part, “The time we spent within these halls will ne’er forgotten be.” Therefore, let us remember. Let us remember those who have gone before us, giving more than a century of service to Olivet.

We give thanks for individuals with names like Nesbitt, Richards, Willingham, Larsen, Reed, Chalfant, Gibson, Galloway, Snowbarger, Sayes, Mitten, Kelley, Parrott—a handful whose names recall hundreds of others whose sacrifice and service have brought us to this glad hour. Most are now unsung and unremembered, yet they are known and numbered among a great cloud of witnesses who join us today from heaven.

Thus, we celebrate and give thanks for more than a building. We celebrate the faithfulness of God, and we give thanks for the faith, faithfulness, and generosity of God’s people.

Simply saying, “Let us remember” begins to call to mind images and individuals who help center a present moment into the timeline of the continuing story of an organization.

When we established the ONU China Initiative and began offering courses in Hong Kong, a ceremony was held in the Benner Library and Learning Resource Center. Placed on permanent display was a large antique replica of a Chinese merchant ship of centuries ago. That large wooden model is still on display in the library as a constant reminder of the university’s connection with China. In the stairwell leading to the classrooms and laboratories of our Family and Consumer Science Department hangs a beautiful and valuable Chinese garment, displayed in a handsome wood case. It, too, is a reminder of our China Initiative. Articles such as these and other visible reminders—building names, donor rec-

ognitions, trophies, and photos—all call the campus to remember who we are and from where we have come.

Special days throughout the academic year such as Homecoming, Scholars Week, Commencement, Grandparents Day, Founders Week, and so on are public occasions for remembering. The idea is to consciously and consistently keep the past alive—not as a shrine or even as a template to be repeated, but just as one measures direction by the wake of the boat, the past can provide a needed reminder of where one has been and thus provide a sense of direction and/or correction for the future.

An effective leader must always remember the guiding vision that gave birth to an organization that provides the overarching trajectory for its future and then be able to remind others of this vision. Robert Townsend writes, “Vision grabs. Initially it grabs the leaders, and through their enthusiasm, followers and other stakeholders start paying attention.”⁶

Commenting on what it means to have a vision and keep that vision alive over time, Warren Bennis tells of talking with the leader of a major medical school and hospital with a huge budget and hundreds of employees who summed up his job in a single sentence: “I spend most of my time reminding people of what’s important.”⁷

A clear and steady institutional memory helps keep things stable as the environment in which an organization exists changes. It is disconcerting to realize that forty percent of the companies that appeared on the Fortune 500 list ten years ago are no longer there. A prolonged recession, along with a cycle of mergers, acquisitions, leveraged buyouts, increased global competition, and a myriad of other factors, has changed the landscape. To navigate such choppy waters a leader must be guided by an internal compass as well as the stars above. That compass must point unerringly toward the

mission of the organization, thus providing a clear sense of why the company or organization exists.

It is easy for one to lose single-mindedness over time. Even a slight variation in emphasis or corporate direction can lead an organization away from its core competencies, and before long, secondary interests and issues become the central focus. A leader's primary responsibility is to guard the mission and guide the organization with a steady hand while at the same time foster innovation and change.

This is what Noel Tichy and Mary Anne Devanna called transformational leadership. Their classic book *The Transformational Leader*, written a generation ago, continues to ring true, for its principles are timeless.

Transformational leadership is change, innovation, and entrepreneurship. . . . These are not the provinces of lonely, half-mad individuals with flashes of genius. Rather, this brand of leadership is a behavioral process capable of being learned and managed. It's a leadership process that is systematic, consisting of purposeful and organized search for changes, systematic analysis, and the capacity to move resources from areas of lesser importance to greater productivity. . . . It is a discipline with a set of predictable steps.⁸

It is particularly important for those individuals who serve in senior leadership roles for a long period of time with the same organization to be able to initiate and sustain a culture and process of transformation. I continue to be amazed at the twin dynamics at work in my organization between a much-needed continuity one year to the next and the clear recognition that each academic year is, in fact, new. Higher education, like health care and business in general, continues to change, and unless a leader can change along with this process, he or she will soon cease to be effective.

The core competency needed is for leaders and their organizations to change without changing. “A challenge in leadership is to accept and manage change without altering what is vital to the health of an organization. In the midst of change . . . leaders hold on to and preserve the heart and essence of an organization’s identity.” Resistance to change, along with the opportunities change brings, creates a certain dynamic tension that must be managed. “Change can be a genuine opportunity for renewal, but the problem is that change has no constituency.”⁹

If the university does not change and adapt to new waves of technology and changes in pedagogy and curriculum design, and if it cannot accommodate the shifting desires of students related to housing, food service, recreation, and extra-curricular activities, it will soon find itself swimming upstream rather than riding the currents. Yet if a school or any other organization forfeits its core identity and values in search of the latest market trends, it, too, will find itself in the backwaters with nothing to distinguish itself from a crowded field.

In an interview/dialogue between the founding CEO of Southwest Airlines, Herb Kelleher, and the present Southwest CEO, Gary Kelly, Kelly was asked, “You’ve made a number of significant changes at Southwest Airlines since you became the chief executive officer. Change, we both understand, is necessary for long-term survival. But do you have a perception of what has *not* changed about Southwest Airlines?” Kelly’s answer is instructive. He replied that it was the core values that had not changed and that it was those values, perhaps even more than the changes made, that ensured the long-term viability of Southwest.¹⁰

Robert Sloan at Sibley Hospital was able to strike the perfect balance of change and consistency. In a way, one could make the case that Bob and his leadership team transformed the hospital and its related enterprises by keeping it the same. Their com-

mitment to mission and consistent patient care, coupled with an aggressive posture related to medical technology and physician needs, along with sensitivity to the constantly evolving medical and healthcare fields, enabled the hospital not only to survive during Mr. Sloan's long tenure of service but also to thrive.

One of the observations I made in the book *Grace-Full Leadership* was that an effective leader focuses on the body, not the head. That means that the measure of one's leadership, particularly over time, is not seen in how well the leader is doing personally or professionally but on how well the organization is doing. I recently noted a celebration for a university president's twenty years of service in which he was lauded for his strong and effective leadership. It was all very nice, but what was not said or seemingly not recognized was that after two decades at the helm, the school's enrollment was stagnant and actually lower than it was two decades before. The school's financial performance was marginal at best, and its overall reputation had not changed. It seemed, from a distance, that there was little more to celebrate than the mere passage of time.

To avoid having little more than longevity as the hallmark of one's leadership, effective leaders must look for and sometimes create opportunities to re-vision an organization so that it can adapt to new challenges and opportunities. This re-visioning begins with a look back to remember and reconnect with one's core identity and ongoing story, which in turn provides a starting point to begin the process of moving forward.