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INTRODUCTION

When Leadership Means Having to Say You're Sorry

It was the worst day of my professional life.

I rode the train from Princeton to Washington that morning, lead in my stomach, reviewing and editing my remarks one last time. Waiting for the elevator in my building, I squared my shoulders and arranged my face to be able to greet our receptionist and other staff members on the way to my office. At 2:00, I made my way down the stairs and into our main event space to speak to a packed crowd of well over one hundred employees, with dozens more listening in by phone.

I took a deep breath and began with an apology. New America, the organization I led, was in the midst of a full-blown crisis caused by an employee's accusation that we had decided to fire him and his colleagues due to pressure from a funder. The accusation was neither accurate nor fair, either with regard to New America or to the funder, but it was calculated, successfully, to create a media storm and to put New America and my leadership in the worst possible light. "The result," I told the staff, "has been a set of events that has damaged New America's reputation for intellectual integrity and independence in the public eye, a

reputation that is our lifeblood. I stand here now not to defend but to apologize to all of you that this episode has imperiled the extraordinary work we do and to figure out what I and we can do to repair the damage going forward. I'm sorry."

For the next ninety minutes, I answered tough questions from the floor and from current and former New America fellows on the phone, including celebrated writers and investigative reporters. One young employee asked, given several bad communications decisions I had made, how could the staff trust my future decisions? Another wondered why I had waited so long to take action against the employee in question. All I could do was to acknowledge that although I had not done what I was accused of, I had mishandled the entire situation, and to reaffirm that I was ready to listen and learn and do the best I could to grow and improve.

Toward the end, a seasoned Washington hand stood up to say: "This doesn't happen in DC; leaders don't apologize and answer hard questions." Perhaps half the room broke into applause, but the rest sat on their hands. A few members of my leadership team also stood up to speak and share responsibility; others remained silent.

The days wore on. When I look back, the time is a blur: my senior team, our hard-pressed communications staff, our board members, all of our staff who had to explain and defend in response to questions from their families and friends—we all just kept putting one foot ahead of the other. We responded to the crisis as best we could while also doing our daily work.

The essence of the attack was the claim that I and New America were intellectually corrupt, bowing to funders' demands at the expense of our objectivity. The media gleefully repeated

the charge without examining how much of our work was and is deeply critical of concentrations of power in our country and our willingness, since our founding, to speak truth to power, regardless of who funds us.

In the trial by press, thirty-eight out of thirty-eight media accounts found against us, accepting that we had actually given in to explicit or implicit funder pressure. Many of those critics were people I knew, people whom I thought would not assume the worst of me, at least not without talking to me first. My Twitter feed soon disabused me of that idea. The things being hurled at me—and through me at New America—were so ugly and so impossible to respond to in 140 or even 280 characters that I quickly realized sanity lay in staying off social media altogether.

I forced myself to go to various events in DC, with my head held as high as I could manage. I wrote as many of New America's friends and supporters as I could, to explain what had actually happened. In turn, I treasured daily messages from friends, and often just acquaintances, who took the time to tell me about a similar experience they had gone through and to offer support and encouragement. Others were silent. Did they not know? If so, I was glad, and certainly did not want to spread the word. Or were they waiting to see which way the wind would blow, a favorite Washington pastime? Worse, did they actually think I was guilty?

Between September and November 2017, I knew that my job was on the line, and rightly so. I was responsible for an organization of some 150 people—thinkers, writers, researchers, community activists, and technologists who worked alongside finance, operations, human resources, development, and communications teams. In the worst-case scenario, if the foundations that provided most of our funding were to stop that funding, livelihoods, careers, and families could be on the line. The work we do, important work of policy research, advocacy, and experimentation on

subjects such as education, care, political reform, work-life balance, open and secure technology, and foreign policy, could be imperiled. The New America board had to decide whether the best response for the institution as a whole was to fire me and start fresh. Some board members had been in on the initial decision to let the employee go, but regardless, we were in a mess and I was the leader who had gotten us into it and failed to respond in ways that might have mitigated the damage.

Amid what felt like an earthquake to those of us at New America, the world continued. Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees were pouring over the Myanmar border into Bangladesh. Tensions between North Korea and the United States continued to mount. Facebook announced that it had found five hundred fake Russian “troll” accounts that it was shutting down. A gunman killed fifty-eight people and wounded many more in a mass shooting in Las Vegas. We all reminded one another that what felt so momentous in our world was a very small blip in the larger universe.

Personally, I was in a very dark place. October is always a period of the year when the shortening of the days presses on me like a physical weight, when I must summon all my energy to ward off what other family members and I refer to, jokingly but not so jokingly, as “the rising tide of despair.” The technical term is “seasonal affective disorder,” or SAD; the reality is a creeping sadness that tracks the waning of the light. I usually fight it with exercise, extra sleep, and time with friends, but now I was trying to keep my chin up for others at New America while staring down a black hole that seemed all too real. My husband, Andy, my siblings, my parents, and even my sons were there for me as they always are, but to little avail.

I knew, objectively, that my troubles were small in the larger scheme of things, that I had far more to be grateful for than to worry about. Still, I was a fifty-eight-year-old woman who had left the security of a tenured professorship to run a nonprofit organization, who had left a foreign policy career to focus more than half of my time on domestic issues, who was the lead breadwinner in my family, who had always prided myself on my integrity and independence—and who was now adrift. In the early morning hours when the gremlins of catastrophic thinking take over, I could see it all come tumbling down. I would be disgraced and out of a job on grounds that would make it very difficult for me to get another one. In my world, the world of ideas, research, and public service of various kinds, sacrificing intellectual independence to funder pressure is a betrayal of our deepest values.

Disgrace and self-doubt go hand in hand. I began to ask myself whether I really was a leader, or at least whether I was a good one. I often give talks on leadership, and always make the point, particularly to audiences of young women, that I did not think of myself as a leader until my late thirties, and then only after my husband prompted me to put myself up for the presidency of the leading professional organization in my field. Still, for the past twenty-odd years, being a leader has become an important part of my identity—as an executive, author, teacher, mentor, and parent. Now, however, friends and even some family members were gently suggesting that perhaps my true strength lay more in thought leadership than organizational leadership.

Lying there in the dark, I also had to confront the possibility that this crisis was part of a pattern. As I will relate, I had had a number of knocks over the previous six or seven years, expectations dashed and revelations of the ways others thought and talked about me that were far from the way I saw myself. That

gap is true of almost everyone, of course—people talk behind our backs. It is just that in the age of leaked emails and social media, we are more likely to be confronted with it.

The criticisms or judgments of others may be motivated by jealousy, or spite, or the simple human desire to be part of an in-group by making others part of the out-group. They may be the product of deep bias—racial, gender, class, and other sources of difference—in which case the task is to push back hard and not allow them to undermine often fragile self-esteem. Still, finding out what others truly think of us, based on their words and actions, can be a mirror that some of us, at least, need the courage to look into. *Why* is what we see—so shaped by what we want to see and what we allow ourselves to see—so different from what others apparently see? I was preparing to find out.

Facing that gap between what we see and what others see is the path to growth—for people but also nations. I often think about this moment in American history as one in which the white majority must work hard to hear and accept the very different narratives of our past that minority communities have experienced and long shared among themselves. As a white woman who grew up in Charlottesville, Virginia, the home of Thomas Jefferson, I grew up with the soaring stories of the Declaration of Independence and the group of Virginians (Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, and many others) who founded and shaped the early Republic in the image of universal ideals of human liberty, equality, and justice. I toured Monticello many times on school trips and family visits, learning about Jefferson the architect, inventor, botanist, lawyer,

diplomat, politician, correspondent, educator, philosopher. Never about Jefferson the slaveholder.

Moreover, like many white Americans, until a few years ago I had never read Frederick Douglass's Fourth of July address from 1852, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?"¹ He addressed his audience, the Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society in Rochester, New York, as "fellow citizens," but of a different nation. The Fourth of July, he said, "is the birthday of your National Independence, and of your political freedom. This, to you, is what the Passover was to the emancipated people of God. It carries your minds back to the day, and to the act of your great deliverance; and to the signs, and to the wonders, associated with that act, and that day." He described the events of 1776 in the most stirring possible terms, of a revolt for freedom against tyranny, justice against injustice. He called the Declaration of Independence "the ring-bolt to the chain of your nation's destiny," a document setting forth principles that Americans should stand by for all eternity. He praised the founding fathers as deeply and fulsomely as generations of Fourth of July orators ever have.

In short, Douglass painted exactly the picture of the glorious past that so many white Americans see when we look in the historical mirror. But then he turned, insisting that his audience look more closely into that mirror to see what so many Americans refused and still refuse to see. He told his audience the story that African Americans, and indeed many people around the world, repeated behind their backs. The story of two Americas.

The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by our fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth [of] July is

yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn. To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony. Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak to-day?

Reading that speech should become as much of a Fourth of July ritual as fireworks, to mark a day of reflection and recognition as much as celebration.

Over the course of my lifetime, scholars, journalists, and activists have started to close the gap between those two Americas. During the Bicentennial Celebration in 1976, the *New York Times* ran a story on Jefferson's descendants, tracing them through the generations and across the country. The article mentioned allegations "through the years" that "the Jefferson family includes descendants of Sally Hemings, a Monticello slave who was reportedly Jefferson's mistress," something I had never heard growing up and certainly not mentioned at Monticello.² Some two decades later, historian Annette Gordon Reed published *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy*, documenting the overwhelming likelihood that Sally Hemings was Jefferson's enslaved concubine, as their son Madison Hemings described her, as well as his wife's half-sister.³

Today, Monticello is a very different place. Visitors still enter the elegant hall with moose and elk antlers sent back by Lewis and Clark mounted on the wall, a Native American buffalo robe overhanging the balcony, and marble busts of Voltaire and Alexander Hamilton flanking the entranceway. They still admire the dumbwaiter and the copy desk of Jefferson's invention and marvel at the views of the Blue Ridge mountains through the French windows. They hear that Jefferson wanted to be remembered, not as president or secretary of state, but as "Author of the Declaration

of American Independence, of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, and Father of the University of Virginia.”

Yet at every turn, the tour guides also tell the stories of the enslaved people who made Monticello, and indeed Jefferson's entire career and lifestyle, possible. Visitors hear about Sally Hemings, and learn that she and her children with Jefferson remained enslaved, although he freed them before or at his death.⁴ They see reconstructions of the small cabins of Mulberry Row, where those men, women, and children lived and worked, practicing the trades necessary for the plantation to function, not only without payment but as property themselves. As Hamilton puts it in his “cabinet battle” against Jefferson in Lin-Manuel Miranda's musical *Hamilton*: “A civics lesson from a slaver, hey neighbor, your debts are paid cuz you don't pay for labor.”⁵

Many visitors don't like this new approach. They want to venerate Jefferson, and indeed the entire American founding, without disturbance or discomfort. As one woman said when hearing about how enslaved people planted and tended Monticello's gardens, “Why are you talking about that? You should be talking about the plants.”⁶

Douglass expected that resistance. His Fourth of July address is long and rarely read in its entirety. Its descriptions of slavery are brutal and unsparing, his denunciation of the complicity of American churches merciless, and his comparison of the United States with all the nations of the earth concludes that “for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without a rival.”

Still, in his conclusion, Douglass finds hope, “drawing encouragement from the Declaration of Independence, the great principles it contains, and the genius of American institutions.” He also believes that knowledge matters, that exposing evil to the “all-pervading light” of the world will hasten its downfall.

Do we, as a nation, have the courage to look in the mirror, past and present, as honestly as possible? To hear and accept at least some of what others say about us—our fellow citizens and the people of other countries who see us from the outside in? Yet can we also do that while maintaining enough pride and confidence in ourselves to move forward? To renew our ideals and recommit to being our best selves without hiding from our worst deeds and impulses? Can we undertake this quest while remembering that “we” must contain multitudes? Our national motto is *e pluribus unum*: “Out of many, one.” Going forward, can we find a way to be *plures* (the correct Latin form of *pluribus* when used this way) and *unum* at the same time?

As the weeks and months marched on, New America began to right the ship, with other members of the leadership team stepping up and staff members rallying around a new mission statement and an even higher set of standards for transparency and integrity for future funding. That mission statement commits us to “renewing the promise of America by continuing the quest to realize our nation’s highest ideals.”

Why renewal and not reinvention or restoration? Renewal means to “make new, fresh, or strong again,”⁷ a concept that looks backward and forward at the same time. *Renew*; *Renew*. The “re” is a constant returning, to our past but also to our ideals; the “new” is creating something that has not existed before.⁸

Reinvention starts fresh, while renewal begins with something already there. Some parts of what is there must be rejected, but other parts can be celebrated. Renewal will require Americans to figure out what we can be proud of as well as what we must condemn and repent.

Restoration, on the other hand, is something very different: an effort to turn back the clock. To achieve the energy and power of renewal requires profound change. In *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin writes of the need both “to celebrate what is constant” and “to be able and willing to change.” “I speak of change not on the surface but in the depths,” he continues, “change in the sense of renewal.”⁹

Our Constitution has survived by changing with the times, through formal and informal amendments and ongoing judicial interpretation. Yet the distinction between restoration, reinvention, and renewal lies at the crux of many judicial battles. Some judges and legal scholars, who call themselves “originalists,” want to pin us down to a specific interpretation of a word or clause held hundreds of years ago by propertied white men in a deeply racist, sexist, and classist age. Others, often labeled as “judicial activists” on both the left and the right, would reinvent the rules that govern us according to contemporary political need. Renewal is in between, constrained by the text in the absence of the national political will to amend it but offering a new understanding of that text by applying the soaring words and universal vision set forth in the Preamble, the Declaration of Independence, and other founding documents to a very different America.

Renewal is also different from renovation, a distinction that has taken me a long time to appreciate. When I would talk about “renewing America” at staff meetings at New America, many of my colleagues heard something that sounded like “making America great again,” a phrase and concept that ignores the many ways in which our past was most definitely *not* great for many Americans. I would explain that my concept of renewal was very different, that it was like ripping out the parts of a house or building that were outdated, ugly, or dangerous but keeping the parts that had beauty and strength: the foundation, the frame, old walls and moldings,

the original wood floors. Many towns and cities across America are doing just that: abandoning twentieth-century malls and rediscovering their nineteenth-century downtowns, renovating them physically and finding new uses for old spaces. Banks become restaurants; movie theaters become meeting halls or makerspaces; shops become galleries.¹⁰

We needed to renew the country the same way, I would say. Keep the frame and the foundation (we call the drafters of the Constitution “framers,” after all), accept good parts of our history, but find, face, and rip out the outdated, ugly, and dangerous parts. Yet I have come to understand why that concept of renewal will not serve. We can’t just rip out the parts of our past that we regret and consign them to the historical dumpster. We must keep them nearby, creating new monuments and memorials that remind us of what we have done and must never do again.

Moreover, many of the country’s cracks and flaws were built into the foundation. Facing them, and their continuing legacy, is a task of reflection and restitution, not destruction. We can renew our commitment to a better future by recommitting to our highest national ideals and striving to realize them, but we cannot erase our past or our present.

Renewal often has a spiritual dimension; it is a concept that recurs in many religious texts. To achieve change on the scale we need requires an element of faith, a belief that it can happen without always being able to see how. True national renewal will require that Americans, *all* Americans, affirm a civic covenant to make the great principles of the Declaration of Independence real and universal. To affirm and renew a civic faith.



No one person could ever represent the nation, much less provide a template for national behavior. Yet individual experience

can provide new analogies and fresh lenses for thinking about and seeing the nation. Personal transformation can also inspire others.

In other ways, what we do in our lives can have direct bearing on what we do in our workplaces, communities, and countries. The “nation,” after all, is not some abstract thing floating out there; it is all of us. We must see ourselves differently if we are truly to see our country differently.

I was well into writing this book when a friend circulated a speech by John Gardner—legendary public servant, entrepreneur, leader, teacher, writer, and founder of the progressive political reform group Common Cause—on “personal renewal.”¹¹ Gardner believed that personal renewal was the answer to going stale in midlife: a way of remaining vital, engaged, and curious throughout our lives, continually discovering new possibilities and new potentials within ourselves. He gave this speech in 1990, but it turns out that he had written a book nearly thirty years earlier called *Self-Renewal: The Individual and the Innovative Society*, arguing that a society could not renew itself unless it produces “men and women with the capacity for self-renewal.”¹²

Gardner’s vision of a vital, innovative, perpetually self-renewing society full of vital, innovative, perpetually self-renewing individuals is compelling, and very American. He was writing at a time when he could look around and see both the energy of Kennedy’s race for the moon and what he saw as the “apathy,” “rigidity,” and “moral emptiness” of much of the rest of American society.¹³ Sixty years on, however, I think the most fundamental connection between personal and national renewal is a starker, harder one. The “re” in renewal, the looking back, cannot be avoided.

Writing about the nation’s need to confront 250 years of slavery, author Isabelle Wilkerson also analogizes between the

individual and the nation. “In the same way that individuals cannot move forward, become whole and healthy, unless they examine the domestic violence they witnessed as children or the alcoholism that runs in their family,” she writes, “the country cannot become whole until it confronts what was not a chapter in its history, but the basis of its economic and social order.”¹⁴ The country, once again, is the people. Becoming whole requires at least a majority of Americans to see our past, including many of our own ancestors, differently. Not to blame, and thereby to shift responsibility, so much as to face and condemn. And to understand that we cannot tell the bright, happy stories without the dark, painful ones woven in.

This link is both personal and institutional, a lesson I learned in the turbulent summer of 2020.

George Floyd was murdered by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin on May 25, 2020, following the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, a jogger gunned down by white vigilantes in February, and the criminally negligent homicide of Breonna Taylor by Louisville police officers in March. Their deaths followed in the wake of so many others, but this time they came as Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous Americans were dying disproportionately from the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the underlying disparities in health, health care, nutrition, housing, education, and wealth that result from systemic racism. Americans locked down at home, and indeed people around the world, also could not look away from a chilling nine-minute video showing a callous and brutal indifference to Black life. Multiracial crowds poured into the streets to demand racial and social justice, month after month.

In June, many corporations and organizations began issuing statements condemning systemic racism. I began working with

Tyra Mariani, then my president and COO at New America and a woman you will hear more about, on our statement. As we were drafting, Tyra said that she was quite certain she knew how African American employees and other employees of color at our fellow think tanks were reacting to the statements being put out by their leadership. All of those statements were condemning systemic racism “out there,” a disembodied harm floating through society, she said, but what about the racism “in here,” shaping our institutions and ourselves?

I did not realize that Tyra’s point was widespread and obvious in the Black community, and presumably in other communities of color, so much so that cultural critic Soraya McDonald refers to it as “TROT,” “Those Racists Over There,” a “figment of white imagination and absolution” designed to avoid reckoning with “The Problem We All Live With.”¹⁵ The point is simple. There will be no change out there, with regard to systemic racism or a host of other national and global problems, without real change in here, in ourselves and in how we relate to one another in our families, organizations, and communities. The process of renewal, with its double movement backward and forward, offers a path to that change.

In the chapters that follow, I will relate the stages of my own renewal and offer lessons and lenses on resilience, risk, leadership, and power. I will also introduce you to concepts and authors I have discovered in my research, an eclectic but connected group.

We start in chapter 1 with “running toward the criticism,” perhaps the single most valuable lesson I have learned over the past decade. Chapter 2 turns to a concept of resilience much broader than I had previously understood, a capacity that is not some innate trait but rather a collective state. Chapter 3 explores a new way of thinking about risk, one that led me to

assess my own past and, indeed, myself quite differently, and to contemplate very different prescriptions to encourage risk-taking nationwide. In chapters 4 and 5, I turn more to my experiences as a CEO, reflecting on changes I have made (or am making in what is inevitably an ongoing process) in how I lead and exercise power. In each of these chapters, I try to imagine what applying these precepts or perspectives nationally might look like.

Chapter 6 pauses to review and reflect on the first part of the journey, to return to the broad concept of renewal, and to introduce the second half of the book. Chapters 7, 8, 9, and 10 grapple with larger themes of American renewal: history, identity, transformation, and spirituality. My own experiences inform these explorations, as they must, but in a spirit not of crisis but of hope.

What if we start to believe again that we are capable of great things as a nation, a nation that reflects all the people of the world, including the indigenous people who were on the northern and southern continents in the Western hemisphere long before any Europeans arrived, and yet is distinctively American? What should we be, could we be, in 2076, at the nation's three hundredth anniversary? Novelist Omar Akkad has a deeply dystopian but plausible vision of a second Civil War breaking out in 2074.¹⁶ What are our *utopias*? We have to at least be able to imagine them.

I am guided all the way through by the Langston Hughes poem that is the epigraph: describing a country of hypocrisy, possibility, and conviction, one "that has never been yet, yet must be." Only if we believe and act on the truth, apparently not so self-evident after all, that all human beings are created equal.

A final note. I have imagined many audiences while writing this book, but I hope women will pay particular attention. Women have a particular role to play in this moment in American and world history, just as we have had at key moments in the past: the abolitionists, the suffragettes, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union movement, the settlement house movement, the muckrakers, the civil rights movement, the environmental movement, and of course the multiple waves of the current women's movement. Women were either the principal players or key players in all of those movements, even as their contributions were often ignored or pushed aside by men and as white women dismissed and denigrated women of color.¹⁷ Today, we have Me Too, the National Domestic Women's Alliance, and the Black Lives Matter Global Network, all of which were founded by women.

As Rebecca Traister writes, women in the United States "have never been taught how noncompliant, insistent, furious women have shaped our history and our present, our activism and our art. We should be."¹⁸ On the contrary, female anger, particularly for Black women, is derided and dismissed. Brittney Cooper expresses both her underlying rage and her anger at the ways in which it is typically treated: "Angry Black Women get dismissed all the time. . . . The story goes that Angry Black Women scare babies, old people, and grown men. This is absurd. And it is a lie."¹⁹

Yet anger need not be feared. "Redemptive anger," according to social justice activist Ruby Sales, is "the anger that . . . moves you to transformation and human up-building." It fuels the energy and determination necessary to make change happen.²⁰ It is the antidote to apathy and despair.

Women can also unite through the experience of multiple identities. We are different from one another in so many

ways, ways that are critical to recognize. The women of the Combahee River Collective, for instance, issued a statement defining and describing Black feminism in 1977 (they named their collective for a daring raid led by Harriet Tubman in 1863). “No one before,” they wrote, “has ever examined the multilayered texture of Black women’s lives,” what legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw described a decade later as the intersectionality of race and gender, as well as other identities.²¹ As we will see, much of Black feminism has been defined against the insularity and racism of white feminism, a divide almost two centuries old. That example is only one of the many different ways women hurt, exclude, dominate, and dismiss one another.

Still, all women—all American women and women everywhere—have had the experience of being defined *only* in relationship to others—as mother, daughter, sister, wife. Many of us cherish those identities, yet they all too often mean that we have not been seen as fully human authors of our own lives. We have fought—are still fighting—to be recognized for our own goals, achievements, and needs.

That common experience can be a bridge, even if it is sometimes a slender span over a wide river. It can help us lead others to an understanding of what true pluralism can mean, embracing many different identities at once as individuals and as a country. It can, I hope, help us bring together the many different movements we support and lead in a common quest for renewal.

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