

1

The Crisis and the Calling

On Friday April 16, 2021, Ontario's Premier, Doug Ford, announced a strict shut-down as COVID-19 cases were spiking once again. Schools were closed. Stores were closed. Gyms, playgrounds, golf courses, and places of worship were all shuttered. Funerals were limited to ten mourners. No one could enter anyone else's home, and even outdoor gatherings with people from different households were banned.

Stay-at-home orders were expected to last six weeks, enforced with new powers: police could ask anyone outside of their homes to provide their address and their reason for being out, with fines of \$750 for unsatisfactory answers. The Ontario Provincial Police planned to screen all vehicles crossing into the province starting on Monday, one minute after midnight.

That night at dinner, my wife Melanie asked my two teenagers, Emerson and Xander, if they wanted to leave the province. Our kids are both competitive swimmers. They were allowed to train during shutdowns, but no pools were open nearby, and their training was stalled. School was online, so they lay in bed during class, cameras and microphones off. Social isolation pressed down hard. They decided to go where they could swim.

At dawn the next morning, Melanie, Emerson, and Xander drove out of the driveway, the car loaded with clothes, swim gear, and Xander's desktop computer. They were off on their 30-hour drive to New Mexico to stay with Melanie's father—racing the clock before new travel restrictions took effect.

For the next three and a half months, I was home alone—forbidden from seeing anyone and leaving my house only for solo hikes. Restaurants were closed. Trips to the grocery store invited suspicion. I dove deep into our freezer, surviving on a bizarre selection of forgotten meals, some good, some freezer-burned, and some just plain inscrutable. Before my family returned, I had posted my new strongly worded “freezer rules” on the fridge.

Freezer Rules

Do you put food in the freezer that you never intend to retrieve?

No.

Do you put food in the freezer with no date, so no one will know how old it is?

No.

Do you put food in the freezer with no label, so no one will know what kind of food it is?

No.

Do you put food in the freezer that is not properly packaged, leaving it to get freezer burn?

No.

Do you put food in the freezer that no one will ever eat?

No.

With plenty of time on my hands, I was prepared to offer feedback on their use of the freezer.

Isolation was wild and disorienting. Work meetings and social connections were flattened onto two-dimensional Zoom squares. I sat in my chair in the living room each Sunday watching the minister of my local Unitarian Universalist church deliver her sermon on Zoom. As an introvert, I thought I'd be fine, but sixteen weeks of solitude was a test.

I learned the Star Trek: Voyager theme on my French horn, practiced scales on my bass guitar, and explored the local hiking trails that I'd never found in twenty years of living in my house. I binge-watched Ozark and Orange is the New Black, and I slept a lot. My only companions were my two dogs, Khalo, a dachshund, and Zia, a blue healer mix, with whom I developed routines. We went on daily morning walks, cautiously keeping our distance from any humans we encountered. In the afternoon, I'd throw a stick in the front yard until somebody wandered off to chew on it. Every evening, I let them know it was bedtime by singing the bedtime song. The experience was surreal and exhausting. Eventually I lost track of what day it was. How long had I been alone?

It was during this period of isolation that I became my university's first transgender department chair.

Department Interrupted

While the world was gripped by a global pandemic, my academic department was facing its own crisis. On February 19, 2020, just eight days after the World Health Organization named the new virus COVID-19, our department

received an email from our dean telling us that “a faculty member has been suspended.” The email went on to say that “undergraduate courses have been reassigned and we will work with individual graduate students to ensure their progress is not interrupted.” Despite this promise, the entire department was interrupted.

That first email from the dean signaled the beginning of a series of escalating events. By August, dozens of allegations had been made under the sexual violence and the sexual harassment policies against seven current and former department members. The accused were faculty, staff, and a student. They were queer and straight. Three of the current members of our department who were accused were men. People were barred from campus, and subsequently investigated, before eventually being reintegrated into the department. Each new allegation was publicly announced, igniting the exuberance of the local media, who reported on the story as if a sex ring had been exposed and brought to justice.

I was dumbfounded. With every new announcement, I struggled to make sense of what I was hearing. How could it be that so many people in my department had been engaged in wrongdoing without my knowing? Early in the months of turmoil, my graduate students came to my office to ask me if I had heard the news. I had no insider information to offer them. They speculated about who it might be who had been “suspended,” but they were unable to guess.

The accused individuals were not allowed to speak to each other or to anyone else in the university community as they waited to hear what their accusations were. Then they waited some more. We all waited. It took eight months before everyone knew what they were accused of. They were perplexed. We were all disoriented. Posters were circulated with the photograph and name of people who had been accused, instructing anyone who saw these people on campus to call security. Care was taken to ensure that anyone who worked with or knew the accused saw the posters. One of the accused needed to ask for special permission to take her child to the campus hospital for a medical appointment.

In July of 2020, as allegations were accumulating, the university’s president announced that he had ordered a “systemic review” of our department, a euphemism for an investigation, “to determine whether there existed systemic or cultural issues within the department that need to be surfaced and addressed.” The introduction to the survey that people took stated that the investigator would “provide expert advice and guidance on the options that are available to improve the culture of the department,” strongly suggesting that the department’s culture needed improvement.

These events were tremendously disruptive to the department’s teaching, to our research, and to our community. While the accused were put on involuntary leaves for up to eight months pending the investigations, new supervisors had to be found for eleven graduate students and dozens of undergraduate thesis

students. In our department, as in most science departments, student training uses an apprenticeship model. It was not a simple task to reassign a student to a different faculty mentor because each student had already invested months or years in developing a research program in their supervisor's area of expertise. The new faculty supervisors who were drafted to rescue the stranded students were not necessarily familiar with the students' research. One student was reassigned to a mentor in a different department, and she ultimately quit the program rather than learn a whole new discipline. One student finished the program with supervisors in a different country. The undergraduate thesis students never saw their supervisors again.

Three former graduate students were unable to work with their supervisors to publish research data that they had already collected. In academia, publications are the currency—the deliverable for which someone's work is recognized. To invest years in a research project and then be unable to publish it is a substantial disappointment. Some students were unable to get letters of recommendation, a necessity for professional advancement in academia. An application that does not include a letter from one's supervisor is viewed with suspicion. Twenty-seven graduate students had to replace members of their supervisory committees—the small advisory group that oversees a graduate student's progress. This disruption meant a loss of expertise, a loss of relationships, and significant delay. We had a record number of undergraduate classes taught by contract instructors, some of whom were hired in the middle of an on-going course. Some undergraduate courses were not delivered.

Our department's community was deeply impacted. The months-long publicity while the investigations were being organized and conducted interrupted the comfortable relationships between graduate students and their supervisors. Trust was replaced by mistrust. After months of confusion, I had a virtual lab meeting to talk to my own graduate students. They were baffled by what was happening and having trouble making progress with their work.

Because we were working remotely, there were no serendipitous water cooler conversations. The accusations, the publicity, the investigations, and the eventual reintegration of the accused happened when we were not gathering in person, so the usual easy access to compassion and support was thwarted. Nearly everyone in the department was confounded by what we were reading in the newspapers. We are a tight-knit department, with about 30 faculty members and about 110 graduate students. We desperately needed to talk with one another, but we were stuck at home.

About now, you may be dying to know what happened that had led to this torrent of accusations. You might even feel frustrated with this lack of clarity. That is how I felt. We were all in the same boat. The lack of information was deafening.

A Dangerous Promotion

In the midst of both local and global turmoil, our department chair's five-year term was coming to an end, and we needed to select a new leader. Nobody wanted the job given the circumstances. While the role of chair has its perks, including a research stipend, teaching release, and a really nice office with a view of the entire campus, this promotion was clearly a hornet's nest. Helping people within the department reorient to work after the disruption was going to be a challenge, and relationships with the university's upper administration had been strained for months. While the chair position is considered a promotion, it was clear that this was no path to greater leadership opportunities.

What the new chair would be stepping into was not entirely clear. We were confused. I didn't understand how this unprecedented volume of allegations had come about. The university's administration was sharing no information with the department leadership that would help anyone who was considering taking the position. It was clear that the job of leading this department was daunting. It was not clear what support was on offer from the administration, if any.

Many members of our department felt unseen and misunderstood. Because the allegations against members of our department had been widely publicized and because the department itself had been publicly scrutinized, we did not feel like the years that we had spent creating a collaborative, student-centered culture was being recognized or appreciated. The department that was being portrayed in the local media did not sound like the department we knew. It was disappointing and frustrating to feel so unheard. It hurt.

Following the president's announcement that the whole department was under investigation, communication with the university's leaders chilled, and we no longer found it possible to voice our concerns about what was happening. Information about what concerns had triggered an investigation into our department continued to be difficult to find. Communication and collaboration became impossible. I was left to make inferences based on what I had read in the news.

When I heard in 2020 that there would be a "systemic review" of our department's culture, I wasn't initially worried. If any department was going to ace the culture test, it was ours. I was naïve. The investigation into the department's culture yielded no finding of facts, but in December of 2020, the president publicly announced his own conclusions from this investigation. The president declared that our department had systemic and cultural issues, which have "created a degree of complacency that has let inappropriate behaviours go unchecked." It was strange that the systemic review preceded the individual investigations. The president announced how the systemic review explained the inappropriate

behavior before the investigations of the allegations revealed whether there was any inappropriate behavior to be explained.

The moment I read the president's characterization of the department's complacency, I thought no one was going to want to chair the department. Without naming names, the president was implying that the department leadership was responsible for these events that had so deeply impacted our operations. Who else would it be who had "let inappropriate behaviours go unchecked"? The reputation of the entire department was tarnished. The years of work we had put into building a supportive culture was dismissed. Once the investigations were complete and people had returned to work, the president didn't rescind his statement about our complacency for nearly four years.

The statement by the university president made the position of department chair perilous. When the chair of Dartmouth University's psychology department was publicly accused of "looking the other way," when complaints were surfacing in his department, he ended his life at the age of 50. Like ours, his department had drawn substantial publicity after a number of graduate students alleged sexual harassment, assault, and misconduct. Students alleged that Dartmouth had ignored or mishandled early reports. The department chair wanted to publicly disavow the claim that he had looked the other way, but the university advised him to hold his tongue. He never felt vindicated, and he became depressed. Our president's announcement impacted our department's reputation and the reputation of the department's leadership and consequently impacted our chances of finding a new chair. It could be ruinous to anyone's reputation to become the next chair of a department accused of complacency. This would be a high-risk promotion.

As the search for our next department chair began, I knew I didn't want the job, so I ran for election to the chair selection committee. I thought serving on the selection committee was a productive way to help my department, and also a good place to sit out the storm. I was elected, and therefore ineligible for the role of chair according to policy.

The selection committee was chaired by our dean, a cardiovascular physiologist, who had known me since our children went to the same on-campus childcare center over 15 years prior. At the childcare center, she had chaired the parent's group, and Melanie and I had worked with her in that capacity. When she became dean in 2017, I went to a welcome mixer that she hosted as the first woman to serve as dean of science.

From my vantage point on the chair selection committee, I watched the selection process become dire. Due to the chaos in the department, we had begun the selection process many months later than would have been ideal. Still, it felt like we were taking our time to go through the motions of a possibly futile search process. Each committee member reached out to their constituents to hear what they

thought we were looking for in a chair. Documents were circulated listing the opportunities and challenges the new chair would be inheriting. This information would have been useful if we had had a list of candidates to choose from, but no one applied.

The dean escalated her search. She asked a number of my colleagues if they were interested in the position. They were not. Some of them told me about the incentives she was offering: teaching release, a research allowance, and a year-long administrative leave at the end of the term. Still, she got a firm “no” from each of them. Filling this role seemed impossible. The challenge of getting the confused, demoralized department back to work was daunting. Being visibly associated with such a besmirched department seemed like a poor choice for someone with aspirations to a higher leadership position in the university. The department was in desperate need of a leader who could steer everyone through the painful epoch we were in. We had no candidates. We were running out of time.

Our chair selection committee had no one to select.

Could We Be Looking for Me?

Part of my job as a member of the selection committee was to reach out to my colleagues to ask for nominations. As I canvassed my colleagues for suggestions, several faculty members and students suggested that I would be a good chair. They told me that although I was quiet, I was seen as compassionate. They told me that I was known to be a good listener, and they thought that I would be fair. One colleague told me that I was providing a positive role model for work-life balance by making my parenting so conspicuous. More than one commented that as a transman I would be able to understand numerous perspectives and bring a greater sense of inclusivity to the role. I was curious about whether my lived experience would offer a helpful perspective that would help me navigate the complexities of the disruption our department was experiencing.

I was an unlikely candidate. No one, me included, expected that I had leadership in my future. I had spent 20 years attending faculty meetings and saying next to nothing. I am quiet, I am introverted, and I generally only speak up when I think I have something to contribute. I was the 13th most senior faculty member in my department of 30.

I have been an academic all of my adult life, but I never planned on leadership being my path. I was dedicated to conducting research, mentoring my graduate students, and doing my best to deliver impactful teaching in the classroom. I earned my bachelor’s degree in psychology from Yale University in 1992 and later went to the University of California, Santa Barbara, to study evolutionary psychology with Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, two of the scientists who founded the

field. I earned my PhD in 2000, and after a two-year postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Denver, I accepted a permanent faculty position and moved to Canada. Melanie came with me. Little did she know the adventures we were in for.

I have a research lab studying social perception and its development. Some of my research involves babies looking at pictures of animals while we measure where they are looking, and some of my research measures differences in how adults perceive faces depending on whether we provide social category labels. I study whether an infant's and an adult's attention is captured by objects that would have been important to survival in our evolutionary history. Most years I have three or four graduate students in my lab, and sometimes I have a postdoctoral fellow as well.

I did have some leadership training and experience. As head of a dynamic research laboratory, I was engaged in leadership. I had served my department for one year as associate chair for graduate studies. In an attempt to develop my own leadership skills, I had recently enrolled in an online course called "Leadership Essentials," which I still regard as the best, most practical leadership course I've taken.

Was I the leader that our committee was searching for?

Bringing My Values to Work

As the chair "selection" committee was running out of time, I came to wonder whether I should chair the department. Until my department was impacted by the events of 2020, I had not considered how my personal values were relevant to my professional life. Work was where I taught and got research done, following the scientific training that I learned during my undergraduate and graduate education. My values, my community, and my impact on the world had nothing to do with work. Sure, I thought about freedom of expression, and evidence-based approaches to problems while at work, but I didn't think about whether my personal values impacted what I did at work. I hadn't thought about bringing my values into leadership.

It was in my Unitarian Universalist (UU) church community where I became familiar with values-based leadership—the approach that would ultimately guide me through my time as department chair. In North America, Unitarian Universalism is a liberal religion, characterized by a commitment to inclusivity. There is not a common creed other than a commitment to social justice and a commitment to being inclusive of theological diversity. I was raised in this religious tradition, after my parents discovered the First Unitarian Society of Salem, Oregon, when I was two years old.

Most of my leadership training and experience and the values that now underpin my leadership came from this community. More than a decade previously,

Gail, a wise elder in our church, asked me to participate in the Canadian Unitarian Universalist Leadership School. She had identified me as someone with leadership potential. She thought that both the church and I would benefit if I had some formal leadership training.

The students in this three-day course were members of my church and of several nearby UU churches. Coincidentally, we stayed in the dormitory facilities of the university where I work, and our learning took place on campus. We participated in creative workshops each day, ate our meals together, and made music and played board games in the evening. We learned about leaders taking care of congregants and leaders taking care of themselves. On our last day at the overnight camp, we worked together to create a service. It was an unusual opportunity to learn how Unitarian Universalists approach leadership and to spend some time with members of nearby congregations.

One of the illuminating stories that I heard at this leadership program was the tale of a woman who had to get up early every morning because she was in charge of making the sun rise. She had a ritual that she performed, and every time she did so, the sun came over the horizon to start the day. For many years she was happy to have this task. She was proud of how diligent and reliable she was, and she was pleased with how impactful her work was: her ritual was always followed by the sun rising. But as she aged, she got tired. She began searching for someone to replace her. Nobody wanted such a rigid job. She persisted in her daily task, now with less relish and eventually with a bit of resentment, until the morning came when she was finally unable to get up and summon the sun. To her surprise, the sun came up anyway.

This tale was a lesson in self-care. The leadership lesson was you don't have to do everything. If you are finding leadership exhausting and unrewarding, step back. If it is important enough, someone else will step up. If no one in the community steps up to adopt the task, that is okay too. Our department had arrived at that moment when our leader was spent. I thought about whether the call for new leadership was compelling enough for me to accept the responsibility.

Given the pain, trauma, and confusion we were experiencing, it appeared to me that our department needed someone to lead with compassion. People needed compassion in order to process what had happened to our department. Our graduate students had been separated from their supervisors, and their research had been interrupted. Students' academic progress had been disrupted. Lives had been disrupted. Some people had been even more intimately impacted. This group needed a leader who would be gentle when managing university processes, when trying to reintegrate people who were being returned to work, and when trying to guide the department as a whole back to the work that is our primary mission.

The second of the eight principles of Unitarian Universalism is "Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations." A compassionate leader for our department

was going to need to provide information to quell the shock and confusion. The lack of clarity about what was happening and what we should be doing was painful for everyone. A compassionate leader was going to need to make time to listen to people. People needed to tell their stories and share what they had been experiencing. The department did not need a dictatorial or corrective boss. We needed a leader who could build trust and relationships to guide us out of this crisis. In my department, there are 200 people, if you count faculty, staff, postdocs, and grad students. If you count undergraduates there are about 1300 more. Every one of them deserves compassion.

Unitarian Universalists also value evidence. The fourth of the eight principles endorses “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” This value is tailor-made for an academic department because research and discovery are our main mission. An evidence-based approach was just what our department needed. I have recently developed a graduate course in evidence-based approaches to diversity and inclusion. By teaching this course, I wanted to empower my students with the perspective that questions about attitudes, stereotypes, and prejudice are answerable, and I wanted to lay the foundations for a more gender-inclusive view of leadership.

In this course, we examined questions like to what extent do implicit biases predict real-world behavior? We read the literature, and although we didn’t find the cure for prejudice in the published literature, we focused on the premise that the question can be studied. There is a lot of research on implicit biases that reveals that each of us has race-based and gender-based biases (Devine, 1989; Fazio et al., 1986; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Important questions remain, like what is the link between individual biases and systemic and institutional inequities? Are biases so baked into institutional practices and policies that they are insurmountable? What approaches to increasing inclusivity would be effective? In the course, we agreed that an evidence-based approach to dismantling transphobia and other oppressions is more likely to be successful than an intuition-based approach, and this conclusion is consistent with the responsible search for truth that is espoused by UU principles. We haven’t solved racism, sexism, and transphobia yet, but as scientists, as psychologists, we do have tools in our professional tool kit that are relevant. We need to understand how the human mind works in order to advance our inclusive values.

My department also required integrity and required information that would allow them to draw their own conclusions about what had happened. The public characterization of our department did not match our view of who we were, a supportive, inclusive department. Our department is full of world-renowned scientists. It was clear to us that the president’s systemic review lacked rigorous methods and scientific integrity. The questions were nebulous and biased and there was no comparison data. The systemic review could not yield interpretable

results. In this context, leading with integrity meant slowing down when there was not enough information available to draw actionable conclusions.

The value of inclusion relates to the 3rd principle in Unitarian Universalism: “Acceptance of one another.” I learned this from my UU teachings, and also from Melanie. Melanie is so inclusive that our parties are huge. At the time of their fifth birthday party, our twins were in preschool in the morning and kindergarten in the afternoon. We invited every kid in both of those classes to the party. Forty-four kids came, and each brought two presents. Of course they did. We had twins. Knee-deep in toys, our house was delightful chaos following that event. Similarly, when we got married, Melanie thought every kid should be invited to be the flower bearer, so our wedding party featured 36 children who each handed me a flower. These flowers became the bridal bouquet.

When we meet in my congregation, we say “Whoever you are, whomever you love, wherever you are in your journey of faith, you are the people of this church, and you are welcome here.” My department needed to hear this message. They needed to know they were all welcome. When I convene a large gathering at work, I used these words of welcome, adapted for a secular community: “Whoever you are, wherever you’re from, whomever you love, you are welcome here.”

A persistent challenge in academic leadership is incorporating the perspectives of multiple stakeholders in decisions that impact them. This is relevant to the Unitarian Universalist’s 5th principle, “The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process.” Unitarian Universalists value both “the freedom of the pulpit” and “the freedom of the pew.” The former suggests that the speaker in the pulpit is free to decide on the topic and offer their own opinions and beliefs. The freedom of the pew is less widely known. The listener, the audience, and the congregation in the pews have the right to their own free and responsible search for truth and meaning, even as they listen to the sage on the stage. From the pew, the listener can disbelieve, reanalyze, and reinterpret. The listener may be unpersuaded. The listener may disagree. The freedom of the pew is an invitation to critical thinking. One thing that I really like about both my religious community and my department is that we can care for people with whom we disagree, and we can include people with lots of different perspectives into our community.

Listening to and understanding other viewpoints and incorporating them into decision-making leads to more robust and equitable solutions than stifling discussion. It was in the context of my UU community that I learned about and began to practice formal consensus decision-making. In formal consensus decision-making, a proposal is not adopted until the group moves through a process designed to make space for all concerns to be considered. The priority is to hear every voice so that the final decision can incorporate all of the perspectives. Currently I am sitting on an advisory committee of the Canadian Unitarian Council that is trying to review best practices in decision-making. Formal

consensus decision-making is one of the methods we are considering, and the one that I am tasked with presenting to the group.

In a recent meeting of the advisory committee, I explained the values: hearing every voice, tapping the creativity in the group, building a robust decision, and ending with a decision that has everyone's buy-in. I explained that decision-making proceeds by first understanding the proposal, then listening for concerns, then addressing the concerns, building a creative solution that incorporates all perspectives, and then carefully and slowly listening for consensus. I find formal consensus decision-making to be powerful, compassionate, fair, and equitable; I wondered if this deep listening would help our department's healing process.

Fundamental to leadership is the ability to build relationships with all of the people under your care. Unitarian Universalists value relationships both between individuals and across the community as a whole. The 8th principle says: "We affirm and promote individual and communal action that accountably dismantles racism and systemic barriers to full inclusion in ourselves and our institutions." Our department includes people of numerous and overlapping social categories, including many ethnicities, genders, places of origin, and religious backgrounds. A leader who keeps the importance of relationship building in mind could help build this community.

My leadership training and experience in the context of my UU community also introduced me to the idea of naming your values explicitly. Once your organization has named its values, those values can become the foundation of consensus decision-making. In the UU community, these values are the foundation of values-based leadership. During this time of crisis in our department, perhaps a values-based approach to leadership and to governance could be the answer.

Answering the Call

It was April 21, 2021, and here we sat, on another Zoom meeting of the chair selection committee. We looked like the tick-tack-toe grid from the opening credits of the Brady Bunch. We had completed the weeks-long process of defining our vision of the role, but we had no applicants. It was starting to look like we were wasting our time. I knew that my dean had had a very difficult time over the past year, and I knew she was working hard to find someone to chair this department. I wanted to help her.

It came to me as an epiphany.

The second it occurred to me that I was the right person to serve our department as chair, nothing else made sense. I felt called. I could do this job. I could take what I'd learned from Unitarian Universalism and from my experience as a transman and bring something unique to the role, bridging viewpoints and providing a role model.

My values could be the foundation of my leadership. I had worked for social justice my whole life, so I thought I was tough enough to endure whatever was to come.

As a transman, it was possible that I had happened into the only leadership opportunity that I would ever be offered. The Glass Cliff theory describes how minority leaders are often offered leadership roles during crises when the chances of their success are slim, a phenomenon linked to systemic biases (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Straight, white, cisgender men may not consider a precarious leadership position because they are confident that there will be other, more propitious leadership opportunities available to them. Members of minority groups are not so confident that other leadership positions will come their way.

It was also possible that, as a transman, I had something to offer. Colonel Bree Fram is an aeronautical engineer in the military and, until Trump's purge of trans troops, was one of the highest-ranking transgender leaders in the United States military. In their book *Forging Queer Leaders*, Fram and Cavallaro (2024) posit that transgender people have some special gifts, superpowers even, that are relevant to leadership.

Transgender people have chosen their own path and have done so in the face of societal objections. Trans leaders are people who have made the conscious choice to continue their work despite massive obstacles. Fram and Cavallaro point to coming out and discrimination as “crucible” experiences that make people both tougher and more empathetic.

Whether it is finding the motivation to continue despite the exhaustion of dealing with constant marginalization or summoning the resilience to get back up after being knocked down, these leaders somehow find the energy to keep going. Further, they transform these experiences into enhanced capacities that make them better leaders and allow them to support others.

(Fram & Cavallaro, 2024, p. 155)

Fram and Cavallaro suggest that the empathy that results from being marginalized, unseen, and unheard prepares transgender people to listen to the people they lead and to dedicate their leadership to supporting professional and personal development. Someone who had chosen to transition is someone who had done the work of self-discovery. A transgender leader therefore understands the process of finding one's values and finding oneself on the road to living life as fully as possible.

Fram and Cavallaro explain that transgender leaders have a special social awareness that comes from a lifetime of having to read the room. Queer and trans folks always have to be aware of who in the room might be a threat and who might be an understanding ally. They listen for little clues to cultural competence, like someone asking whether you have a “partner” rather than asking if you have a “husband.” This social awareness is a leadership super boost.

Transgender people may have an inherent advantage when it comes to perspective taking. Because of the nature of the accusations that my department had experienced, it occurred to me that men and women might have different perspectives, and I wanted to make sure I understood what everyone was seeing. It occurred to me that I might be in a special position to hear and bridge multiple perspectives.

Fram and Cavallaro point to creativity and innovation among queer and transgender leaders. Such leaders have spent a lifetime engaged in problem-solving. Sometimes the challenge is administrative, like having to find your gender on a form where the possibilities are limited, or just getting a driver's license. A friend of mine who is a trans woman faced the task of selling a vehicle that was registered to her in her former name and gender. Her very practical solution was to rustle through her closet for the most masculine clothing she could find, pull her hair back, and just go down to the motor vehicles office to get the job done. She was, however, delighted when she approached the counter and was asked, "How can I help you, ma'am?"

Often, the challenge that queer and trans folks face is social, demanding the real-time navigation of a conversation that has become suddenly awkward. These small and large problem-solving experiences leave a transgender leader prepared for creative and innovative problem-solving.

Transgender people may have experience with advocacy and activism. It is hard to make it to adulthood as a transgender person without life handing you an opportunity to advocate for yourself. I sued the province of Ontario so I would be recognized as a parent to my children. I've worn a "Silence equals death" T-shirt to protests at City Hall. I show up to Pride events whenever I can. I talk to people when their children come out as transgender. I talk to trans children and support their journeys. A lifetime of activism develops a transgender leader with both practical knowledge of how to navigate the system and the conviction required to do it (Fram & Cavallaro, 2024).

I started to believe my department would benefit from having a transgender leader. Although I was quiet and probably spent less time socializing than my peers did, I did have good relationships with folks in the department. I pictured myself sitting in the chair's office. I contemplated leadership. I imagined being the one who attended to my department's needs. But I was aware that the opportunity was dangerous. As a transman, I was somewhat vulnerable, even though my transition had been well accepted when I returned from a year-long sabbatical with updated pronouns. What if my gender made it easy for people to link my department's tarnished reputation to mine? What if my elevation into a leadership role made me conspicuous enough to attract transphobia? What if becoming chair was career limiting? What if it ruined my career? The decision required some bravery.

I phoned Melanie in New Mexico. She knew about all of the devastation in our department, she knew that we were selecting a new department chair, and she knew that no one had volunteered to take the position. When I told her “I think I need to chair the department,” she said, “I know.” She couldn’t have been less surprised. Of course, she understood that my next five years were going to be intense, but she knew it was the right thing to do. She understood that my department needed me. So, I answered the call.

On May 12, 2021, with 45 minutes left before the deadline, I sent in my application. My email read

My willingness has a simple motivation: I love my department. I am in awe of my colleagues and their compassion and support for one another. I am touched by their dedication to our students. As always, I admire my colleagues’ commitment to excellence in teaching and research, and their sincere desire to help us develop into a better university. I want to do what I can to help build the solid foundation that my department needs in order to do the excellent research and teaching that brings us all together.

I was invited to an interview with the committee that I had so recently left. They asked me, for example, how I “would most effectively engage various stakeholder groups in strategic planning in the Department,” and “Please comment on the morale/climate/dynamics in the Department, and how would you influence positive change.”

As the only applicant, I got the job.

A Perilous Path

I imagined that I could make a meaningful difference as the first transgender department chair. I would be a visible role model. I would make it apparent that trans people can lead. Transgender leadership in academia is not unprecedented: Aaron Devor is a transman who has served as department chair, dean of graduate studies, and chair in transgender studies at the University of Victoria. Still, trans leadership is exceptionally rare.

Once I had answered the call, I felt confident in my decision to become chair. I had responded to the dean’s struggle to fill the position. I believed I could guide the department to values-based leadership. I invested in my leadership development: Over the next few years, I took every leadership course that was available on campus, from a strategic leadership course to a course designed to recognize the mental health needs of employees. I completed an Inclusive Excellence Leadership

Program offered on campus. Off campus, I enrolled in an anti-racism course called “White People Work,” and Cornell’s Fostering an Inclusive Climate course. I completed the extremely practical and applicable “Leadership Essentials” course. I became proactive about honing my leadership skills and finding opportunities to learn. My approach was to be humble and open to development.

I saw a path, and I was determined. People needed care. People needed to be heard. They needed calm, and they needed the space to connect with their leader and with each other. I told one of my most senior colleagues, “The department is going to be okay.”

If I’m honest, I expected undying gratitude from my boss for stepping into an essential role that no one else wanted. What I got was a place on the hot seat.

I got the job but not the gratitude.

The next five years proved to be the most challenging in my life. My reputation, my career, my family, and my health were in jeopardy. Soon I would be asked to resign.

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