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If We Had a Real Leader

Imagining Covid under a normal president.

By [David Brooks](#)

This week I had a conversation that left a mark. It was with Mary Louise Kelly and E.J. Dionne on NPR's "All Things Considered," and it was about [how past presidents had handled moments of national mourning](#) — Lincoln after Gettysburg, Reagan after the Challenger explosion and Obama after the Sandy Hook school shootings.

The conversation left me wondering what America's experience of the pandemic would be like if we had a real leader in the White House.

If we had a real leader, he would have realized that tragedies like 100,000 Covid-19 deaths touch something deeper than politics: They touch our shared vulnerability and our profound and natural sympathy for one another.

In such moments, a real leader steps outside of his political role and reveals himself uncloaked and humbled, as someone who can draw on his own pains and simply be present with others as one sufferer among a common sea of sufferers.

If we had a real leader, she would speak of the dead not as a faceless mass but as individual persons, each seen in unique dignity. Such a leader would draw on the common sources of our civilization, the stores of wisdom that bring collective strength in hard times.

Lincoln went back to the old biblical cadences to comfort a nation. After the church shooting in Charleston, Barack Obama went to "Amazing Grace," the old abolitionist anthem that has wafted down through the long history of African-American suffering and redemption.

In his impromptu remarks right after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy recalled the slaying of his own brother and quoted Aeschylus: "In our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."

If we had a real leader, he would be bracingly honest about how bad things are, like Churchill after the fall of Europe. He would have stored in his upbringing the understanding that hard times are the making of character, a revelation of character and a test of character. He would offer up the reality that to be an American is both a gift and a task. Every generation faces its own apocalypse, and, of course, we will live up to our moment just as our ancestors did theirs.

If we had a real leader, she would remind us of our common covenants and our common purposes. America is a diverse country joined more by a common future than by common pasts. In times of hardships real leaders re-articulate the purpose of America, why we endure these hardships and what good we will make out of them.

After the Challenger explosion, Reagan reminded us that we are a nation of explorers and that the explorations at the frontiers of science would go on, thanks in part to those who "slipped the surly bonds of earth to touch the face of God."

At Gettysburg, Lincoln crisply described why the fallen had sacrificed their lives — to show that a nation "dedicated to the proposition that all men are equal" can long endure and also to bring about "a new birth of freedom" for all the world.

Of course, right now we don't have a real leader. We have Donald Trump, a man who can't fathom empathy or express empathy, who can't laugh or cry, love or be loved — a damaged

narcissist who is unable to see the true existence of other human beings except insofar as they are good or bad for himself.

But it's too easy to offload all blame on Trump. Trump's problem is not only that he's emotionally damaged; it is that he is unlettered. He has no literary, spiritual or historical resources to draw upon in a crisis.

All the leaders I have quoted above were educated under a curriculum that put character formation at the absolute center of education. They were trained by people who assumed that life would throw up hard and unexpected tests, and it was the job of a school, as one headmaster put it, to produce young people who would be "acceptable at a dance, invaluable in a shipwreck."

Think of the generations of religious and civic missionaries, like Frances Perkins, who flowed out of Mount Holyoke. Think of all the Morehouse Men and Spelman Women. Think of all the young students, in schools everywhere, assigned Plutarch and Thucydides, Isaiah and Frederick Douglass — the great lessons from the past on how to lead, endure, triumph or fail. Only the great books stay in the mind for decades and serve as storehouses of wisdom when hard times come.

Right now, science and the humanities should be in lock step: science producing vaccines, with the humanities stocking leaders and citizens with the capacities of resilience, care and collaboration until they come. But, instead, the humanities are in crisis at the exact moment history is revealing how vital moral formation really is.

One of the lessons of this crisis is that help isn't coming from some centralized place at the top of society. If you want real leadership, look around you.