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As I have deeply sought to understand myself as a leader over the past twelve months, it has been a painful, challenging, and an enlightening process. The moment of profound realization came in January of 2020, when I had just completed my fourth downsizing initiative at Leesa Sleep, the company I founded and hired most of the workforce. Every time we had to streamline the process, cut the budget, and evaluate the business aspect, human capital was always involved. I knew and accepted the fact that this was part of my role as Chief of Staff. However, accepting that realization and handling it mentally and emotionally are sometimes separate issues. I was living constantly in turmoil because of the emotional toll it took on me personally to make the decisions of who should stay and who should go. I would watch team members react in various ways from losing it completely, to completely accepting and realizing it was no one's fault, and it just was. I had one group of individuals that had just been notified they would no longer be employed who aligned and created a list of all their combined grievances with management, the company and specifically, me. This was the beginning of my leadership transformation as who I was and what was being said were complete opposite individuals.

To say I was blown away by the nuclear attack was an understatement. I was immediately told by my CEO and Chairman of the Board, "Do not read it. This happens when people are hurt." Any leader knows that people say and do things they do not mean in their moment of shock and grief. While I appreciated their support throughout the process, I read it. Every. Single. Word. I was crushed by what people I had, in my own mind, advocated for, been to battle to keep, and supported, promoted, and advanced. It felt like the ultimate betrayal and my soul and spirit were crushed. I was accused of being anti-sematic, I was accused of being more supportive of black employees, and then immediately called racist. These are just a few of the allegations that were deeply personal. I am Christian, a follower of Jesus. Jesus was a Jew. Two of my nephews are bi-

racial (black). I was left reeling. Further, I was the Chief of Staff. I am always supposed to be for the employee. My job is to walk the tightrope between the management and the employees. I could not see at the moment what they were saying. How could I feel like I was something so different than what I was being portrayed? Had I really lost all perspective with who I am? I struggled with this question for weeks and began a journey to my own insight into living a divided life.

A few months after this event, the country was hit with COVID lockdown. Working remotely, flipping our working process upside down and learning a "new normal" was overwhelming for the entire organization, as well as myself. This time also allowed me to overthink EVERYTHING. The list of my personal and professional shortcomings, my leadership, my role as Chief of Staff, my life, and my future. I started to question my own disconnect between who I am in my heart and who I am on the outside. I was the leader with the rough edges and was feared and admired for being able to stay through three administrations. The leader who is in fight mode constantly. Fighting for a company, fighting for investors, fighting for employees, fighting for friends and family, and never fighting for herself.

A simple life altering question was asked after the Black Lives Matter marches began. We decided to bring on a licensed clinical social worker and counselor, and a friend of mine who happened to be black. Our first team session started with the question "When did you first see color?" With this question, it unlocked a flood of not too wonderful memories. Memories I had suppressed and never fully communicated to my family for 40 years. I was nine and one of my sisters had taken me to a party in which there were not appropriate things for a nine-year-old to see. To spare you the sorted traumatic night events, it ended with my sister saying, "If you ever tell our parents about the evening, they will be killed along with Rob." She threatened all the

things I cherished the most at that point in my life. The black man that was with her said he would be in the one to do it. This was the first time I saw color and trauma, and this was the moment I can now identify as when a switch went off in me to fight. To fight for my family, to protect them and to make sure nothing happened. A lot to take on as a nine-year-old.

I share this story as a point of reference and context that to live an undivided life, you must go back to where the division started. Where the moment in time perhaps changed you for the better and for the worse. This drive to fight has helped me achieve every single goal that I have set on my goal list. This drive to fight has helped me stay in a marriage, navigate numerous moves, meet new friends, start new jobs, and start and finish degrees. However, this fight has also kept me fighting within myself. The fight of not being good enough, the fight of not having voice in the room with all men, the fight of not standing up to this sister from the story. The fight of not standing up to people that called me racist and anti-sematic. The fight of not walking away soon enough. The fight of staying too long. The fight of the edges. The fight of distancing people. The fight of not becoming a victim. The fight of being opinionated and fixing others, but not fixing myself because the pain is too deep. The fight of revealing another layer of the onion. This process goes on and on to the point of exhaustion, where all I want to do is collapse in an overwhelming feeling of grief and regret and then the sun rises again, and it is a new day to fight.

The transformation for me over the past year has been to learn and acquire the tools for my toolkit so I can put down the weapons and stop the fight from within. I have wrongfully held people and mentors accountable, when they did not even know what was happening and how they could help. I am in constant state of asking for forgiveness for myself and for those people that do not feel like I showed up for them. Every day I pray and ask God, “Who is supposed to hear from me today?” What is the message they need to hear from me? Is it an apology? A thank you note of

gratitude. With each act, it brings me closer to closure of relationships that needs to end or need to be nurtured. I choose to no longer fix others, but instead walk alongside them on their journey of discovery, if they will have me in their circle of trust.

In Parker Palmer's: *A Hidden Wholeness, The Journey Toward and Undivided Life*, he writes "The shadow behind the "fixes" we offer for issues that we cannot fix is, ironically, the desire to hold each other at bay" (p.117). This passage resonated with me during my moments of reflection of the employees' comments. I was trying to fix many people, overcompensating for shortcomings with one group of people to uphold another. I was pretending to appear to be concerned, while abandoning them with the same abandonment I have felt over the course of my childhood and professional career. The edges people were seeing in me was the abandonment. I would never allow anyone fully in nor would they allow me fully in because there was no trust. I have never had a circle of which Palmer describes who could help me fully see myself. I was scared to trust anyone and to protect everyone, so they did not have to feel the fear that I felt. The fear of losing everything you hold so precious and dear. And most of all the fear of coming to terms of who I really am. Accepting the feedback for what it is. A point of reference of one person's perception of who I am on a day. However, the self-awareness is when the feedback is consistent there is work to do.

The transformation for me over the past year is to put down the weapons and stop the fight from within. I wrongfully held people accountable, when they did not even know what was happening. I am in constant state of asking for forgiveness of those people that do not feel like I showed up for them. Every day I pray and ask God, "Who is supposed to hear from me today?" What is the message they need to hear from me? Is it at an apology? A thank you note of gratitude. With each act, it brings me closer to closure of relationships that need to end or need to

be nurtured. I choose to no longer fix others, but instead walk alongside them on their journey of discovery, if they will have me. I want people to feel seen and heard as Palmer describes. I want to be seen and heard.

I know more than ever now, who I am personally and who I was. I am still on the journey of where I am going next. I am not afraid anymore of baggage of memories of my leadership regrets weighing me down to keep from living my true and authentic life. I believe transformation happens every single day in my life and each day I can embrace the moment of opportunities to be transformed for the better, for the worse or not at all. There are moments in my life where transformation comes in a ton of lessons all at once and other times, it is just a small moment in the day of how to engage. The difference now is when the days are overwhelming and I feel like I cannot handle the lessons, I reach for guidance, solitude, breathing and my faith to get me through. I also realize that the fear of not being able to truly be transformed as I hope is just another insecurity of failure. Surrounding myself with my own circle of trust is and will continue to be a source of strength in my continued journey.

References

Parker J. Palmer. *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004. p.117.