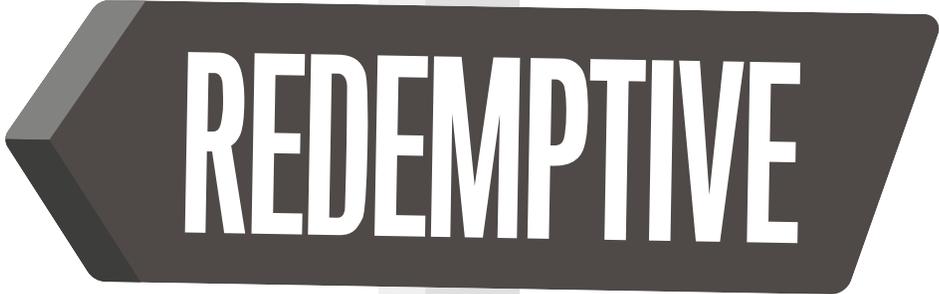




**EMBRACING**



**REDEEMPTIVE**



**DISRUPTION**

**HOW YOU CAN INTENTIONALLY GUIDE  
YOUR ORGANIZATION INTO THE FUTURE**

**J. DAVID SCHMIDT**



## *In what seems like a bad movie, suddenly these aren't the best of times in our country.*

A social disaster within a financial disaster within a health disaster has suddenly reframed our work as leaders in the months ahead. The winds of the pandemic and cultural anguish have turned rapidly overnight. Whatever “normal” we were pivoting to, and the mad dash to “open up” into a shiny post-pandemic world, has become an epic cultural moment that needs something different—something more intentional from leaders.

“There was a feeling in recent weeks that things were headed in the right direction, and that carefully reopening the economy was possible, and that a sense of normalcy was around the corner,” said Brian Dodge, president of the Retail Industry Leaders Association. “But the senseless death of George Floyd and the ensuing violence of the last few nights has shattered more than storefronts, it has broken the fragile confidence of a nation already struggling with anxiety, frustration, and fear.”

Suddenly, taping X's on our floors, ramping up our signature programs, ministries, and fundraising, and processing our cultural pain has created an unsettling incoherence on top of already tired spirits, minds, and bodies.

Yet, this moment creates an opportunity.

Quaker missionary Stephen Grellet said:

“I shall pass this way but once; any good that I can do or any kindness I can show to any human being; let me do it now. Let me not defer nor neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again.”

Grellet's words amplify an invitation waiting for us.

So, this has me thinking.

*We aren't going to get another shot at this moment, to paraphrase Grellet.*

How do we want to be remembered five years from now? How do we want to recall our leadership behaviors in the “time of COVID,” now marked by fresh racial injury and pain?

It isn't just about exiting a pandemic anymore. It's about exiting a pandemic with different hearts about who our neighbor is. The leadership assignment has changed.

As leaders, how will we best steward this moment—to lead in such a way that someday we will recall this season with humility, gratitude, and legitimate joy that we guided those we serve through to safe harbor with more tender hearts?

The result of this entire experience will be one of two options. We can move forward just as before with no learnings, change, or growth, or we can embrace the redemptive disruption. Over the next weeks and months, leaders and boards will have to choose which direction they take.

**Consider the graphic below:**



Thoughtful leaders will make an intentional decision to catch their breath at this signpost and do some soul work for themselves and their organizations. This is the place where guided strategic conversations will empower you to move into the future prepared for greater mission impact. Call it future wayfinding—a unique planning approach well-suited to the cultural moment we’re currently in.

Good “technical” leadership work is needed right now to ensure the mission we are stewarding and those connected to it are safe and well cared for—and that we reset our organization’s role of offering hope.

But good technical leadership can also blind us to the more “adaptive” leadership work that this unique time in history calls on us to express. Otherwise, we may find ourselves facing the same realities we left behind earlier in the year, and precious little to show for our pandemic experience.

*So you stand at a decision point: Will you submit to this moment as a redemptive disruption?*

# CHOOSING A PATH

The ancient Jewish prophet Jeremiah, quoting God's invitation to us, wrote:

"Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls."

Several paths, not just one—and each with a different outcome—are open to you if you choose to embrace redemptive disruption. What are you as a leader and your organization's Board ready and willing to do to lean into this season and work to create a better future?

## HERE ARE THREE PATHS TO CONSIDER:

### **1. THE PATH BACK TO THE LAND CALLED FAMILIAR. SAFE. COMFORTING. AND NO DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS.**

Some leaders will choose to uphold the status quo. But to take this path back to the land of familiar without much thought—to restart virtually all of what your organization was doing with an overlay of post-pandemic inconveniences and to set aside the work of rethinking and resetting your organization's response to racial pain "for another time"—could be capitulation too. Best to know that now and count the cost of silence or turning inward. Is this the path you've found yourself on?

### **2. THE PATH TO THOUGHTFUL, ORGANIZATIONAL DECLUTTERING. GETTING FREE FROM SOME STUFF.**

Before the pandemic, you knew there was some pruning to be done in your organization. Some value systems, programs, and protocols had outlived their usefulness and it was getting time to do something about that. Now, lost revenue, lost donor connections, lost ministry opportunities, a lost season of service, and a culture in pain brings this need to prune into sharper focus. More importantly, in these past months, you have collected some valuable insights, clarity, and maybe even a sober-mindedness or spiritual conviction that will need to find its proper organizational place.

Bolting these precious assets on to what has gotten tired just will not work. You may need to draw some relationships to an end, make some new hires, and take a hard look at some programs, cultural ways, and budgets that will need some critical stress-testing. Changing your value systems, strategies, and structures will create margin for what God has for you as you move out of this pandemic and cultural crisis and into the season ahead.

### **3. THE PATH TO A FRESH START. RICH REWARDS BUT NOT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART.**

Organizational change history tells us that only a handful—maybe 10-15% of the organizations and churches in this country—will make the choice to allow their pandemic experience to reshape their future. Determined to rethink just about everything, we might call them “history’s handful” (a name coined by the founder of CRU, Bill Bright, to describe visionary donors willing to give 1 million dollars to his cause.)

This path will have fewer on it. They will do the decluttering, BUT they will also be ideating and working to answer:

- **What lessons have this health, financial, and social justice crisis taught us?**
- **How can we be better prepared for a future where “VUCA” events (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) will continue?**
- **What can we harvest from the past months of difficulty that points us toward something restorative and life-giving?**

This option is the stuff of fresh vision, innovation, and shifts in culture and paradigms. It’s the deepest response to the question, **“What are we not doing that if we did it would fundamentally change the trajectory of our mission results?”**

# COMMITTING TO FUTURE WAYFINDING

Future wayfinding starts close in with a simple but profoundly important decision: to cease striving.

An ancient wisdom writer wrote:

*Step out of the traffic. Take a long, loving look at me, your High God, above politics, above everything. —Psalm 46:10*

## CEASING TO STRIVE IS AN INVITATION TO THREE ACTIVITIES:

### 1. TAKING TIME TO LAMENT.

Aaron Niequist, author of *The Eternal Current*, once told me, “David, you can only redeem what you weep over, and you can only weep over what you name.”

This pandemic has stolen lives, eroded our financial and programmatic capacity, revealed holes in relationships and structures, and undone our confidence in institutions—even our churches and nonprofits—which we may have thought were more bullet-proof than they actually were.

But more importantly, we need to lament the raw and open wounds between God’s peoples. We need to reflect deeply on the need for fresh fidelity between what Jesus asked us to do and be to our neighbors and how we actually are. This is not new work for leaders of churches and many nonprofits. But it has fresh urgency right now to keep getting it more right than we have.

Can we, with integrity, open “our church” and get back to “our organization’s normal programming,” and not also refresh our answer to the question, “Who is my neighbor?”

Lament is not about self-flagellation that “we can never do enough.” It is taking time to get quiet, grieve, and then to listen for God’s voice and what He’s inviting us to do next. Lamenting opens our souls to God’s voice and healing touch. It bleeds off some of the pain of the loss. And it strengthens our will to do new things in new ways with new people.

## **2. TAKING TIME FOR DISCIPLINED REFLECTION.**

A friend wrote to me, “I am concerned my organization isn’t doing any reflection. I am concerned that our church isn’t either. And I am concerned that I am not doing any either.”

Some of us have found fresh clarity in these past months of pandemic hibernation and more recently experiencing our nation recoil together against injustice. We have seen God show up in incredible ways. Some of us have discovered fresh insights about ourselves, our leadership, our churches, our organizations, and our closest relationships. We are seeing things differently. Some of us simply know that while moving into the future and away from the worst of the pandemic is crucial, so is proactive reflection.

But these gifts of new clarity will slip away without an intentional process and time set aside to harvest for future use.

In their new book, *Improv Leadership*, Stan Endicott and David Miller write,

“Going North is a game of slowing down speedy people and maneuvering around the barriers they erect to get to their hearts. To go north with your team, you have to be willing to slow down... you have to be willing to set up situations and conversations that many leaders don’t have the patience to get into.”

To get to the future, you are going to need far more than just the competencies of the people and volunteers who work with you. These months have grieved people’s hearts. These hearts need time to heal. Disciplined reflection is a way to steward what we have learned. It will take some sting out of the losses, actually settle our spirits, and increase our joy quotient as we reflect on God’s care in this season.

## **3. TAKING TIME TO GIVE THANKS.**

Musician Jeremy Riddle says, “The quickest way to release heaven on earth is to worship. Worship is the main activity of heaven and the destiny of all things.”

Right about now, experiencing some heaven on earth would feel mighty good to most of us. Expressing gratitude to God for promises kept or promised to keep will bring fresh energy for the days ahead.

Lament. Reflect. Give thanks. These three things can be accomplished in an afternoon and a dinner hour—it’s just a matter of choice. Ultimately, they will prepare your own heart and the hearts of those you involve in the heavier lifting of future wayfinding.

## COMMITTING TO A PROCESS OF FUTURE WAYFINDING

“For some organizations, near-term survival is the only agenda item. Others are peering through the fog of uncertainty, thinking about how to position themselves once the crisis has passed and things return to normal. The question is, ‘What will normal look like?’ While no one can say how long the crisis will last, what we find on the other side will not look like the normal of recent years.” (McKinsey & Company, “Beyond Coronavirus: The Path to the Next Normal,” by Kevin Sneader and Shubham Singhal)

As a strategic planning consultant who has been helping nonprofits and churches plan for brighter futures for four decades, I have mothballed my tried and tested tools for planning and turned toward “wayfinding into the future” instead.

### **Why?**

Because in the months and years ahead, the organizational containers, strategies, structures, and staff we have grown accustomed to will need greater resilience. In the uncertainties of a post-pandemic world, we will need to become more adept at thinking in scenarios—wayfinding when the context is changing and forcing changes on us as well. We will have to learn how to be radically local. And adaptive. Prepared for more uncertainty.

Increased unemployment, food insecurity, family tensions, loss of hope, lethargy, mental and emotional stress, social unrest, and weariness from new patterns will all need to be addressed in the near term. Longer-term, our organizations will need attention. The delivery channels, platforms, team members we rely on, and the messages we send to financial partners will need to shift as we change and adjust to a new future context. Every dollar will need to count more than ever. New program muscles will need to be developed. And Boards will need to be properly attentive if they want to see their organizations survive. We all will have to learn how to keep our energies up—and our souls well-tended to. These demands simply will not be met with pre-pandemic thinking and planning.

## WAYFINDING INTO THE FUTURE EMPOWERS YOUR ORGANIZATION TO:

- **Begin to build a post-pandemic worldview and capacity.**
- **Harvest the learning from these past few months.**
- **Sort your treasures—what has become baggage and what needs to go to the curb.**
- **Create the likely context or scenario in which you will operate.**
- **Shape a vision that matches that possible context.**
- **Identify several possible pivots or adjustments you may need to make.**
- **Develop a set of steps that work you back to this moment.**

It's a lively set of guided, "strategic conversations" that will yield real benefits and take the anxiety out of walking blindly into the fog that lies ahead. Thriving in a post-COVID-19 world will not happen by chance.

*It will require intentionality.*

But in the resolve to do some strategic thinking and heart-searching work, we'll find ourselves becoming better neighbors, and the organizations we serve flourishing and stronger than ever.

Interested in processing what you've just read with a coach? Slingshot Group is offering a **nonprofit assessment** to help you and your leadership team or Board discover the next steps you need to take to intentionally guide your organization into the future.

**Get a free, personalized future readiness assessment for your nonprofit by filling out [this form](#), and we'll be in touch!**

