

Audacity

Go from a Wannabe Leader to the Leader Others Wannabe

By
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CHAPTER 1

Leadership Is an Act of Rebellion

When I was eleven, my little brother Ben started kindergarten. On the first day of school, his teacher asked the kids to draw a picture of their house. Ben grabbed a green and a brown crayon and started drawing an oddly shaped triangle with a couple of poles.

The teacher made her way around the classroom, peering at the children's drawings, paying little compliments, and then she stopped at Ben's desk, confused and maybe even a little amused.

"No, Ben," she lightly reprimanded. "Not what you did this summer. Draw a picture of your house!"

See, Ben had drawn a picture of a tent. She assumed he was drawing a picture of camping. The problem was that Ben had correctly followed her instructions. That tent *was* our house. That's where we had been living for months, at the edge of the woods. Homeless.

This was the moment Ben realized something was wrong. That the way we were living wasn't just "not normal," but that it wasn't OK.

When he told me about the conversation later that day, I immediately felt scared and unsafe. He had no concept that a tent shouldn't be a house. *Did Ben tell her we were living in a tent? What if she reported us? What if we were taken away from each other?*

This wasn't the outlandish fears of an eleven-year-old. We were often left alone in the tent since my mom had two to three jobs, doing the best she could to earn a living. As the oldest, it was my job to take care of the other three kids when she was gone—my sister April, Ben, and my youngest sister, Judah, who was barely one year old.

Thankfully, he hadn't given away the full truth. I told him, in no uncertain terms, that he was never to tell anyone we were living in a tent. We weren't the stereotypical picture of homelessness. Mom was a college graduate. Second generation, in fact. Nor did she have any addiction issues.

We had once lived in our own home. Dad was a Vietnam vet who had struggled with baggage he carried into the marriage. Mom had been pregnant with me and April while still in college.

In the wake of the divorce, Dad had moved out of state, which meant he was able to dodge child support. That's just how it was back in the eighties.

Without that financial support, Mom had to figure out how to provide for four children by herself. First, we moved out of the house into a crappy rental home. But even that became unaffordable, so she thrifted a tent and moved us out to the woods on the edge of town just as the school year was ending.

We stayed there all through summer until November, when it started to snow. She tried to position it all as temporary, saying, "We're just enjoying the outdoors for a while."

But I knew better. I knew we were stuck there, living out of Rubbermaid tubs, taking turns sleeping on the floor or a cot. At least once, because we had nowhere to store food, a raccoon broke in and stole our food, creating food insecurity that still follows me all these years later. As well as an intense case of raccoon-phobia.

Another single mom in town found out about our situation. She had a converted garage apartment and offered it to my mom to rent. Her generosity spared us from the worst of the winter. The gesture wasn't a handout. It was a hand up. The one we needed at just the right time. She saw a problem and had the means to help solve it.

Now, before we go much further, this isn't a book about homelessness, despite the field that I'm working in today. This is a book about true leadership. And how true leadership is grounded in solving problems.

There's a lot of chatter about the concept of servant leadership. But this leads to the false notion that you cannot serve until someone says you're a leader.

Instead, we need to think about leadership as strategic generosity. When that other single mom offered us her converted garage, she was a leader to us. She was being strategically generous. She could have offered it to someone else, someone with fewer kids who could pay more, or even on time. She offered it to us instead.

Our homelessness *was* temporary. Not because of what our family could do on our own, but because someone saw a problem and offered a solution.

Leadership doesn't belong to a title. Leadership belongs to the audacious problem-solvers.

Ditching the Necklace of Shame

Everything in life is a conditional point in time. Married, divorced, kids, empty nest, house, no house, job, no job. It's a universal truth. Conditions and circumstances can change in the blink of an eye.

And that’s why it’s so dangerous to base your identity on a condition. Conditions can never fulfill the role your identity should. They are temporary moments in time. Your true identity is shaped by the choices you make, not the momentary hardships you endure.

For me, homelessness is not an identity I carry. It’s a point in time.

But for a long time, I wore it like a necklace of shame. Invisible to others, yet heavy, suffocating my sense of self, and seemingly impossible to remove. Every new situation I walked into—school, sports, relationships, church, work—that label weighed on me.

And it whispered to me the same BS over and over: *You’re poor. You’re not good enough. You’ll never be good enough. Everything will fall apart or be taken from you.*

Those lies often seemed like the truth because we continued to have money problems. This manifested itself with thrifted clothes, lunch tabs that went unpaid, and lack of spending money for field trips. When the school fees went unpaid, my teacher would withhold my report card, which announced to the whole class that we were late in paying. Again. Every time that happened, the necklace grew heavier.

During my junior year, a high school counselor told me I couldn’t get into college. She seemed to be stuck on two facts: “Your SAT scores are too low, and your family can’t afford college.”

Rather than help me figure out a solution to those problems, her words pulled on the necklace of shame.

The defining moment came when I finally realized I had a choice: to let that part of my childhood script play on repeat ... or rewrite it. If I wanted to go to college, then I needed to start by ditching the necklace of shame.

I couldn’t control how others would label me, but I could control how I labeled myself. I didn’t have to let a condition be my identity. In a little act of rebellion, I decided my life wouldn’t be defined by my family’s circumstances.

You don’t need to be able to verbalize exactly what you want yet. At eighteen, there was no way I could say, “I want to be a college graduate and homeowner.” But deep down, that’s exactly what I wanted. Stability. Security.

So, I applied to a college, and didn’t get in. Undaunted, I applied to another and *did* get in.

With each choice I made, my identity became clearer. With each step taken and problem solved, the necklace of shame grew lighter.

Certain life circumstances have a way of gifting a necklace of shame. Maybe it's a trauma or stigma you endured. Maybe it's a degree you didn't get. Maybe it's a relationship that ended. Maybe it's a job you unexpectedly lost.

Yet there is a core truth. Each one of these is a condition—not an identity. Traumatized is a condition, not an identity. Heartbroken is a condition, not an identity. Unemployed is a condition, not an identity.

The actions you take say far more about who you are than any condition. If you can learn to solve problems for yourself, then you can learn to solve problems for others. If you can lead yourself, you can lead others.

Self-leadership starts with a single act of rebellion: the decision to say, “I will not be defined by my conditions.”

In our work at Quadel, we've seen how dangerous it is when people confuse their conditions with their identity. Survival mode keeps you stuck where you are, unable to see where you can go.

All too often, someone facing housing instability is branded as a homeless person, when instead, we need to realize they are a person experiencing homelessness. That shift in perspective influences whether the help offered to that individual is a handout or a hand up.

A handout reinforces their condition as part of their identity. A hand up complements who you truly are and helps set you up for the next stage. Because some people need help with ditching their necklace of shame. They need that one person who sees past the condition and can help lighten the load.

Not sure if you have a necklace of shame? You can assess this by asking:

- What conditions are you letting define you?
- What past circumstances or conditions are you wearing as a necklace of shame?
- What little acts of rebellion do you need to commit to free yourself from the problem and find the solution?

The answers will become your road map to grit and resilience.

Gritty Solutions

Desperation drove me forward more than anything else. Desperation to never live like that again. To never smell the tent mustiness, never to worry about the next meal, never taste government-issued cheese again. That pushed me to mentally think about the next steps. *How do I get out of this?* And in that solution-making, there was a glimmer of possibility. Dare I say hope?

Angela Duckworth has an interesting take on hope. She says, “Grit depends on a different kind of hope. It rests on the expectation that our own efforts can improve our future.”¹

Most people don’t know how to bring solutions to the table. They only bring the problem, and no path or solution.

For instance, imagine you go to your supervisor and say, “I want to be promoted.”

Their question back to you might just be “So what do you want to work on? What strengths do you bring to the table?”

If you don’t have answers to those questions, don’t expect it to go well. That’s the awkward conversation about leadership; people can often visualize where they want to go in terms of a title and salary, but they have no vision or plan for how to get there. They’re expecting someone else to give them the road map.

The hard, no-BS truth of the matter is that no one is going to make the plan for your success. You have to come up with your own road map, your own recommendations. You have to put in your own effort to shape the future you want. You are the GPS, no one else.

Real grit makes a plan. Real grit makes a difference. Real grit finds solutions.

Now, it would be easy to look at my story and say, “Good for you, Katie. But you got lucky. What if I put in the effort and nothing happens for me?”

Let’s address that whole “lucky” bit. If I had been the only person in my family to escape our situation, I might agree with you about luck. But that’s not remotely the case. I’ve long been a fan of the mantra “I am a great believer in luck, and I find the harder I work, the more I have of it,” which is often attributed to Thomas Jefferson.

Each of my siblings found their own solutions to solve their own problems.

¹ “Angela Duckworth Quotes,” Goodreads, accessed September 25, 2025, https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/14132767.Angela_Duckworth.

My sister April was so affected by our conditions that she went to Purdue University, earned her master's in social work from the University of Michigan, and then went to work with children facing mental health struggles. Today, she has her own counseling center with multiple locations that is known for providing evidence-based solutions for children, families, and couples who are in crisis. And she's been on national stages teaching others about solutions to address the country's mental health and burnout crisis.

April chose that path because she sees it as a way to give back for the growth she has experienced. She's now able to turn around and offer others a hand up through her career.

My brother, Ben, faced a major challenge beyond our financial circumstances. He was shot in a hunting accident when he was eighteen and told he would never walk again. The following day, he was moved to a trauma care hospital where they were able to save his leg, and he was eventually able to walk around with a cane. Of course, he was also prone to getting in trouble at school by hitting other kids with the cane.

He wasn't considering college at first, but he ended up applying for and being accepted at Indiana University. He later told me he changed his mind because he saw me "make it out." That made him realize he could make it too. If I had thrown off the necklace of shame, he could tear up the drawing of a tent still hanging on his mental walls.

What's great about Ben's story is that he truly had no idea what he wanted to do when he went in as a freshman. Too many times, we put pressure on ourselves to have everything figured out beforehand, when sometimes we just need to let ourselves figure out the path in the process.

Turns out Ben could set the curve in calculus and ended up getting a major in math and physics. After graduating, he went into the Navy, went to officer school, and was recruited into the nuclear program. In fact, during officer candidate school this was the first time Ben had ever worn a completely new outfit. His Navy dress uniform. Eventually, they ended up paying for him to go to medical school, and now he's a doctor.

"We never had healthcare growing up," he once said. That's why he wanted to become a doctor, which has led to him having his own opportunities to offer a hand up through working at clinics in Honduras and Uganda.

And then there's my youngest sister, Judah. She wasn't even one year old when our lives imploded and has no recollection of life in a two-parent household. Her journey was more complicated in some ways because of some of that deep-seated trauma from childhood. She took the first job she could do out of high school, believing that she could never make it in college.

But then she ended up being able to earn a degree while working and is now a senior vice president. She handles billion-dollar acquisitions, having first graduated from the school of hard knocks. And if that's not enough, she's also chair of an international nonprofit focused on helping women and girls achieve economic empowerment.

How we grew up is no longer a necklace of shame for us. Each of us found our own path to audacity. Each of us learned to solve problems, one at a time, and then turned around to help others. We grew up under similar conditions, and yet our identities weren't inherited—they were chosen.

The conditions you're facing right now might look impossible. Your life might feel like a total mess. Believe me, I get it. You can't spell mess without *me*. We go waaaay back with each other.

But you can always choose grit. You can always choose hope. You can always look for the solution to the problem. When you solve a problem, you become a leader. The problem of living in a tent was a condition. The solution of leaving the tent was a choice.

Turn Messes into Messages

No message in your life is more powerful than the one you tell yourself. Keep giving yourself negative messages, and you'll have negative results. Keep believing BS lies, and you'll make them come true.

When preparing for my TEDx Talk, I realized a framework was needed to define one clear message for the talk. My life has been full of so many ups, downs, sideways slides, and cartwheels. Where to even start with the mess? Should I talk about the time I ran away from home? The time my sister was kidnapped by a relative? Something more universal, like motherhood? Or adopting? Should I talk about my version of grit?

I never wanted to be a poster child for homelessness, but I realized that my story, and how it led me into the affordable housing sector, was a message worth sharing. So even though “homeless” is not my identity, it was a moment I could use to differentiate myself.

Until my TEDx Talk, my siblings and I had never unpacked our stories together as adults. Doing so was really healing for us as a family and allowed us to gain more perspective from one another.

By making my necklace of shame visible, my story has become my secret sauce. When I look across the landscape and at other executive chairs, I realize how my lived experience elevates and emboldens who we are as a company and how we deliver affordable housing.

It is possible to turn a mess into a message. The part of you that you are most scared to share? That condition that you wanted to escape? It just might be the X factor that makes you stand out.

Would I want to relive being homeless? Of course not. But I also wouldn't be able to do the work I do now to the level I do without that experience. Those survival skills gave me the foundation for leadership skills that I use every day.

My mess taught me how to problem-solve, how to provide, how to give myself a yes when others said no, and how to see the potential in others that they can't see yet.

Certainly, you need to heal from whatever you've had to go through. Nor do you want to turn your trauma into a spectator sport.

But can you reframe the struggles you've faced and discover a deeper inner strength or reposition them as leadership skills? That's worth exploring. Take some time to process through your journey, especially the messy parts. What is the mess in your journey that can form the core of your message?

That's the first problem you have to solve to establish your leadership. Dig into your mess. Find your message.

When you do, you can defy the conditions of your life. You wield audacity to unlock your true identity as a leader. You get to reclaim your pain and turn it into your power. You get to take the negatives and reframe them as positives.

If you've seen the musical *Wicked*, this is why Elphaba's message in "Defying Gravity" is so phenomenal. When I first heard her sing this live in the theater, my soul was in awe of how her story had been playing out onstage. My heart was bursting with who she became and how she reinvented herself, controlled her own narrative, and reframed her own dysfunctional point in time. This gem is a must-see if you want your inner core challenged with the hope of reinvention.

Where you came from and what you've gone through do not solely define you. That may be how the world defines your identity, but frankly, the world shouldn't have a say. It's your story. Conditions are temporary, but your choices are lasting.

Tough Love Moment

The biggest problem in your life? It's you. How you see yourself will determine if you stay stuck, go backward, or move forward.

But you also get to be your own biggest solution.

Start by building a bridge to yes for yourself. And then make sure you turn back and help others across the bridge with strategic generosity.

Wannabe leaders wait for others to give them an identity. True leaders cut through the BS in their brains and remap their options. You have to make the moment. No one will figure it out for you. But when you don't let a condition define your identity, everything is figure-out-able.

How do you start to figure it out?

Determine if you are wearing a **necklace of shame**. If you are? Ditch that necklace.

Then define your own **single act of rebellion**. What temporary situation, past or present, has changed you? Or what do you want to change? March right up and speak to it. Much like I did when I said that I would never live like that again.

Find a **gritty solution**. What choice can you make that will get you to where you want to be? And if things are feeling messy, how might that **mess become your message**?