

Leadership Has a Shelf Life—Revisited

IT CAN BE A STRUGGLE TO HAND OVER THE LEADERSHIP BATON, EVEN WHEN IT IS THE RIGHT THING TO DO. **BY JANN E. FREED, PH.D.**

In May 2016, I wrote an article titled “Leadership Has a Shelf Life.” I described how leaders often stay too long because of the uncertainty of what’s next for them and their organization. It is often a dilemma to do what is in the best interests of both the organization and one’s self. I wrote, “It takes moral courage to leave a safe place when you have been comfortable.”

I thought of this article as the pressure was being put on President Biden to step down after the Biden-Trump debate in June. It could be a classic Harvard Business School leadership case study about shelf life, transition, and succession. We witnessed how hard it is to let go so others can step up. It is a struggle to hand over the baton, even when it is the right thing to do.

HEALTH VS. AGE

The focus was mostly on President Biden’s age, but how old is too old? I have been fortunate to attend the Berkshire Hathaway meetings for years, and Warren Buffett is not too old for the thousands of people who attend and the thousands more who listen to the meeting online. At the 2023 meeting, Charlie Munger was 99 and Buffet was 92. People were still on the edge of their seats seeking their wisdom about investments and about life.

The issue with President Biden was more about health than age. Political analyst Van Jones was emotional as

he explained the situation on CNN: “It’s kind of like when you’ve got to take the keys from your grandpa and everybody says, ‘You’ve got to take his keys,’ and he’s fighting and fighting, and everybody’s so frustrated.” But you know it is the right thing to do and it is still hard to do, and even harder for the “grandpa” to let go of the keys.

The ego often gets in the way of doing the right thing. Carol Orsborn is the author of “Older, Wiser, Fiercer: The Wisdom Collection,” and her latest book, “Spiritual Aging: Weekly Reflections on Embracing Life.” In a recent conversation, Orsborn told me this: “If you listen to the heroic voice of the warrior within, you’ll be warned that surrender is always premature. You’re weak if you stop fighting too soon. Never give up hope.”

REACHING FOR THE NEXT VINE

One metaphor is to think of swinging on vines in a jungle. It is hard to let go of one vine unless you see another vine within reach. Without another vine, we cling as tightly as we can to the current vine.

What is the “vine” for President Biden after being President of the United States? Former President Jimmy Carter is a wonderful role model for all of us. He is the author of 32 books, founding member of The Elders, and in 2002 was awarded the Nobel Peace Laureate. His “second chapter” is an admirable one, indeed. ■



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