



Maintaining a Careful Balance

By SR. PATRICIA TALONE, RSM, PhD

There are times when being a mission leader feels like walking a tightrope, and the position demands exquisite balance. I am not talking about emulating the Flying Wallendas, gracefully traversing a thin wire above the heads of a gaping crowd of admirers — with no safety net. That type of spectacle is for fame and show. Rather, I am speaking of maintaining equanimity and balance throughout the daily demands of bearing the “heat and burden of the day”¹ in a complex and ever-changing, healing ministry of the church.

The role of mission leader is to strengthen mission, vision and values, integrating them throughout the organization as colleagues work together to carry on the healing ministry of Jesus Christ. A multifaceted position, it engages spirituality, ethics, leadership, education, organizational development, clinical excellence and community outreach — virtually every aspect of the system or institution.

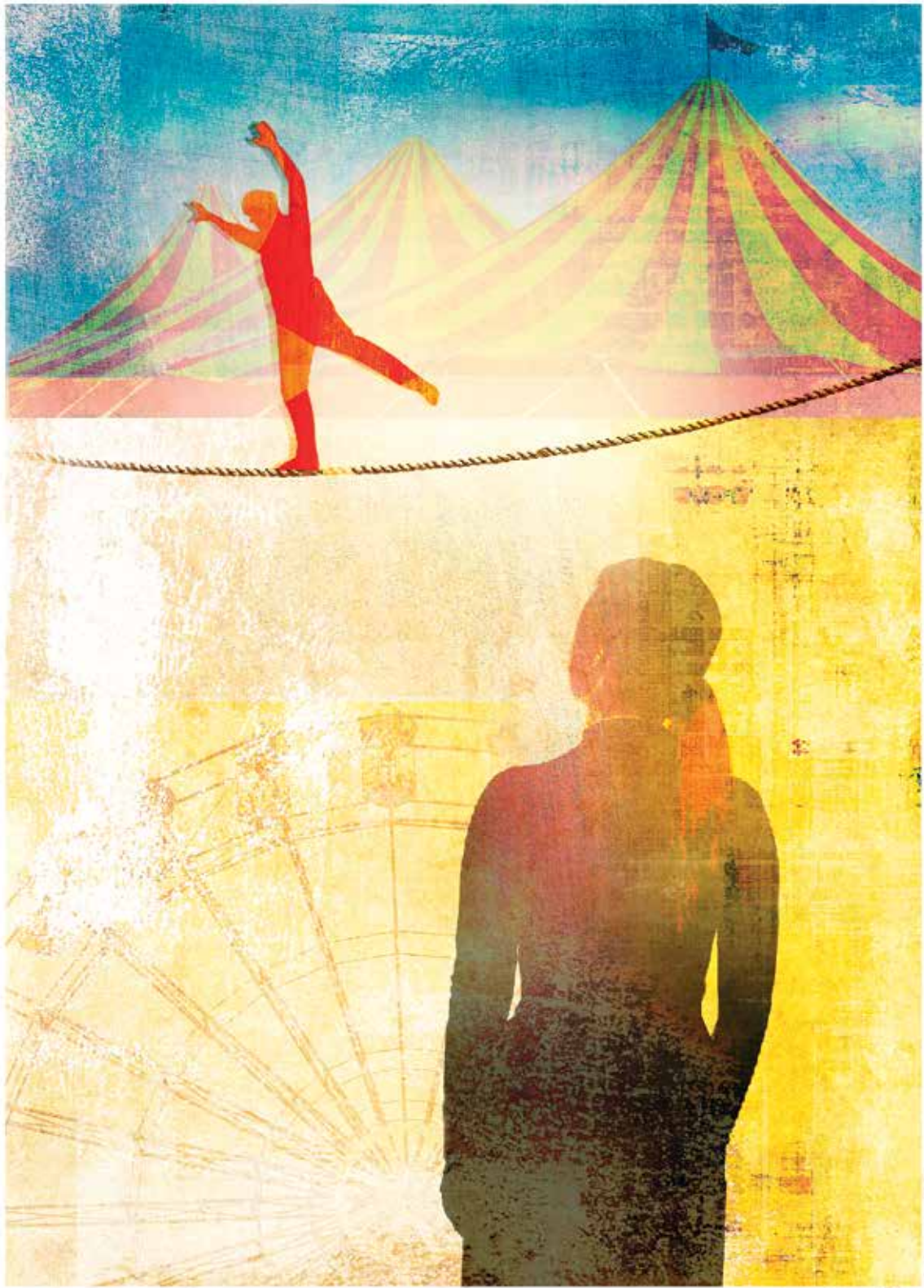
One might wonder, then, about the comparison with that of a circus performer. The best mission leader deftly maintains equilibrium while stepping ahead, gaze fixed on the goal. He or she moves — seemingly with ease — between and among executive functions and a much broader and inclusive ministry. If the mission leader focuses solely on being an administrative insider, she runs the risk of becoming yet another “suit” in the C-suite, above and apart from the very colleagues whom she seeks to influence and lead. That position renders her inapproachable and ineffective.

Alternatively, if she sees herself as an institutional outsider, taking a purely prophetic, pedantic or even pious stance, she jeopardizes her ability to influence corporate decision-making, policy and strategic planning — in other words, her abil-

ity to truly integrate the mission into the fabric of the organization.

Walking such a fine line can cause discomfort and sometimes self-doubt, even in persons who are highly educated, experienced and prepared for the position they assume. Like many realities within the Catholic world, the role of the mission leader is never an either/or, but rather, a both/and. Catholic institutions are at one and the same time Catholic to their core and respectfully ecumenical in their workforce, the persons they serve and in their place within civic communities. The mission leader is and must be an executive, with the prepa-

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ration, experience and personal gravitas to take his or her place at the table with trustees, administrators and managers. At the same time, he or she must vigilantly maintain the attitude of a true servant leader.

STATE OF EQUILIBRIUM

One seeking to function as mission leader within Catholic health care would do well to form the habit of equipoise, a state of equilibrium. A mission leader requires balance between being an insider and an outsider, between executive presence and servant leadership, between championing Catholic identity and an ecumenical hospitality to all persons regardless of faith, nationality, gender or gender identification, economic or social status.

Popular practices like meditation, yoga, Pilates and tai chi assist individuals to develop and maintain focus as well as physical flexibility and balance. Balance takes practice. Indeed, the Flying Wallendas have, as a family, worked at their dangerous craft since the end of the 18th century. Their high-wire art has been passed from generation to generation through careful instruction and hard work.²

The mission leader is first and foremost a mature individual who develops virtue. Aristotle in many writings, but notably in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, refers to virtue as the “mean.”³ For Aristotle, the virtuous person must hold himself or herself in a stable equilibrium of the soul. It is an intentional state of mind supported by lifelong virtuous habits that dispose an individual to be centered, providing moral equilibrium to his or her life.

The question for each mission leader is how to achieve and maintain equipoise throughout a long and ever-changing career. There are many virtues that can and do sustain one, providing balance and integrity to one’s life work. Chief among these is the virtue of self-knowledge. I use the term virtue intentionally, because true self-knowledge requires work, repetition and receptivity. More than a grudging willingness to participate in a 360-degree evaluation, the virtue of self-knowledge puts one daily in the presence of one’s Creator, where he or she prays with St. Augustine, “Lord Jesus, let me know myself and know You, and desire nothing, save only You ... let me banish

self and follow You.”⁴ Self-knowledge leads one to daily examination of consciousness in the spirit of St. Ignatius.⁵ A practice that is neither obsequious nor masochistic, this practice leads one to prayerfully examine each day’s activities, asking God for the grace to see one’s actions in light of a growing awareness of who one is before God.

The pursuit involves thanksgiving, a survey of actions, an opportunity to ask forgiveness, and renewed resolutions to live life according to God’s call. Authentic self-knowledge, then, is true

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humility, because the individual stands before the Creator, knowing and acknowledging both strengths and weaknesses all the while praising the God who has called him or her to the inestimable privilege of serving God.

RESPECT AND DIGNITY

The *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services* reminds us that Catholic health care is a “community marked by mutual respect among caregivers.” This respect, according to the bishops, disposes one to deal with those it serves and their families with the compassion of Christ.⁶ For the mission leader who is eager to maintain balance in his or her work and life, respecting the dignity of each person is grounded in the fact that the mission leader knows him- or herself, recognizes that he or she is not the expert, but is one member of the community of servers. Such an attitude insures that the mission leader approaches each person with respect, reverence and an openness to learn from each one. In the words of Robert Greenleaf, author and founder of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, the mission leader “may be not so much the prophetic visionary ... as the convener, sustainer, discerning guide”⁷ for those engaged in the community of care.

Neither a deep self-knowledge, a true humility, nor a profound respect for each person will prevent the mission leader from making serious



mistakes and even from falling. As one who seeks to be a leader of a church ministry, one must of necessity follow the crucified Jesus.

Walk into most chapels in Catholic hospitals and you will see upon the side walls depictions of the Stations of the Cross. A pious practice originating in the 15th century, praying with the stations may be more devotional than doctrinal. This form of religious art nonetheless expresses centuries-old meditations by the faithful on the last day of Jesus's life. Of the 14 stations most commonly found in places of worship, three depict Jesus falling to the ground under the heavy weight of the cross. Yet, followers of Jesus believe that after each time he fell, he stood up again and moved forward in his desire to fulfill the will of his Father by being faithful to the end.

EXQUISITE BALANCE

On a much more secular level, and without being disrespectful to the devotion of the Stations of the Cross, if one looks at the Flying Wallenda family, one again sees failure and falls, even to death, but a firm resolve to move continually forward. Forward motion keeps one in balance in a way that a frozen stasis cannot. To maintain balance, one must keep one's gaze fixed upon the destination or goal rather than upon self.

On a strictly physiological level, having balance means being able to maintain your bodily position comfortably and for long periods of time.⁸ In a sense, the mission leader must do the same thing if he or she hopes to integrate the mission of the organization throughout its many and varied parts. For the mission leader, sustaining balance means holding in tension both right brain and left brain activity. It involves and fully engages the whole person in his or her body, mind and spirit. Such balance encompasses all the multiple

relationships within a complex health system — everyone from the CEO to the mail-room clerk.

Much is at stake if the mission leader does not hold his or her ministry in equipoise. Because, as with the Flying Wallendas, there is no safety net. Everything depends upon exquisite balance.

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NOTES

1. Matthew 20:12.
2. The Flying Wallendas, "History," www.wallenda.com/index.php/wallendas-history.
3. *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "Aristotle," www.iep.utm.edu/aristotl/.
4. This particular translation of Augustine's "Prayer for Self Knowledge" is found on Villanova University's Mission and Ministry website, www1.villanova.edu/villanova/mission/campusministry/spirituality/resources/spirituality/restlesshearts/prayers.html.
5. See: George Aschenbrenner, "Consciousness Examen," *Ignatian Spirituality*, an online service of Loyola Press. Aschenbrenner intentionally uses the term "consciousness" rather than "conscience" because he focuses on all of the actions of one's day, not simply mistakes or even sins. www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen/consciousness-examen.
6. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*, 5th ed. (Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 2009), Directives 1, 2.
7. Robert Greenleaf, *The Power of Servant Leadership* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1998), 37.
8. American Geriatrics Society, Health in Aging website, www.healthinaging.org/aging-and-health-a-to-z/topic:balance-problems/.

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