

# It Takes a Village, and That's Ok

by Emmylou Todd

Have you ever been so tired you can't see straight? So tired you can't even sleep? There's not enough melatonin or essential oil diffusing that can cure the tired I'm talking about. I mean, the kind of tired where the inside of your body hurts.

That's where I was.

Every situation that came across my desk, phone, or computer was a FIRE. Nine times out of ten, they weren't even perceived fires, they were real emergencies that involved the health of a student, legal implications, irate parents, worn out teachers — you know the situations.

Ya'll, I was exhausted. I was tired of being a leader. I had no motivation. I was about one revision away from submitting my resume to Target (love Target, no slight to them, just the place I think about when I consider a career change).

Being a leader takes a lot out of you, and I finally came to the realization that I had to admit defeat. But wait — leaders don't do that! They don't let their people see that they're struggling! What a conundrum I was facing: admit that I can't meet expectations anymore (hindsight will tell me they were my own expectations, not the expectations of others) or keep dragging my body through the grind every day?

When I stopped to consider this question, I found myself going way back to before I was a leader. What I found was that I don't ever remember NOT leading. Ever. When I think back to elementary school, I was always trying to "lead" others, even if it meant not considering what I needed. Isn't that crazy? At the ripe old age of nine, I remember being in Mrs. Hunter's class trying to rally my classmates to get an extra recess just because my best friend, Jennifer, wanted to climb on the monkey bars again (which, by the way, I was successful in this negotiation -- twice).

Upon reflection of my leadership journey, I realized that even though I always thought I hated cliches, it turns out I live my leadership life by them implicitly. Go figure!

My all time favorite cliche: Jill of all trades, master of none. If you're in education and reading this, you get it. I've always believed I was a Jill and not a Master and, actually, I've been ok with it. I simply thought my role was to get the "stuff" done. I work behind the scenes while wearing 432 hats and then move on to the next thing. No problem. I'm good at this, right?!

Being a leader is exhausting. Nobody warns you about it. Sure, once you're a leader, all the research-based books and inspirational quotes are readily available, but no one tells you going into this that it involves your blood, sweat, and tears. Well, maybe not blood, but sometimes it feels that way. Finally, it hit me. Like a wrecking ball.

Burn out.



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Ugh. Not me, right? I had so much experience and time invested in this leadership gig. Surely this wasn't true. I approached Dixon, my principal from my first year of teaching and now one of my supervisors in the instruction department, and shared this epiphany. He listened and said little, like he always does in the beginning. (True wisdom comes from processing, he would say and I, who tended to shoot from the hip, would now agree.)

More time passed. Same slump. I shared my struggles with Regi and Emily, two of my best friends since college. I talked to my mom. I talked to my supervisor. I talked to my dog, General. And circled back to Dixon. Talking wasn't helping.

Then, my life changed. (This statement is semi-dramatic; but really, it was a VERY exciting moment for me).

As corny as it sounds, I remember what I was wearing when I got the email that I had been nominated to participate in the **Education Leaders Experience** (ELE). Some leaders in my district that I have the utmost respect for had already participated in this experience, and I was VERY jealous every time I heard about what they were doing in their classes. In short, ELE is a collaboration between Colonial Life and the Center for Educational Partnerships at the University of South Carolina (Go Gamecocks!) to help educators connect to the business world and an opportunity to celebrate leadership in education. LEADERSHIP! Could this be what I needed?

As it turns out, yes! It was exactly what I needed, but not in the way I anticipated. ELE was refreshing. It was raw and uplifting. But it was also painful. As educators, we often neglect to focus on our own strengths, what we bring to the table, because we're constantly trying to build up our students, their families, and our colleagues. I expected kumbaya, some corny, yet tear-jerking quotes or speeches and some of the other standard leadership PD. (Disclaimer: I genuinely LOVE kumbaya and tear-jerking quotes and speeches from time to time.)

To my surprise, this was not the case...they rolled out the red carpet! At each session that was held, we were greeted with meals, cool swag, and the most rare gift of all: the gift of time. We spent time with real people in the business world who shared how education impacts what they do and how they plan based on current trends in education. We spent time meeting new people and networking. As it would turn out, the most impactful use of time for me, personally, was participating in **Clifton's Strengths**, a survey tailored to outline your top five strengths based on your responses to a series of timed psychometric questions.

If you met me before ELE and I had to blurt out three things I'm good at it would be these: I'm occasionally funny, I often volunteer to be the group historian on trips or at special events, and I'm good at making small talk with people I don't know (as I get older, this last one becomes more difficult, but still makes top three).

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After investigating my strengths through Clifton's Strength's Finder and my participation in ELE, my list is different now. As it turns out, for example, I'm very good at making complex information easy to understand for other people, and I'm good at encouraging growth and performance in others — who knew!? (For any of you Clifton groupies, this falls under the "analytical" and "input" strengths). Did I mention that my day-to-day work life involves communicating and creating guidelines? BINGO! I've felt like these tasks have been the things that weigh me down sometimes, but when I use my new, positive thinking, I can see that I'm valuable in my current position. I didn't need a change of scenery or a swift kick in the rear. I needed to understand that I, Emmylou, have talents and can use them to help others and even thrive in my current role. What a tiny, yet novel revelation? Sometimes you just can't see the forest for the trees (see what I did there?)

Since my ELE experience has ended, I'm happy to report that things are wonderful and perfect and I got a raise (clearly kidding). All jokes aside, things are still hard, and there are still fires, and sometimes I go home and want to cling to my good friend, Tito, instead of responding to emails after hours. But now I'm armed with the reminder that I serve a purpose. When things are difficult, people depend on me to help them navigate hard things and difficult situations. ELE couldn't have rescued me at a more opportune time.

Here's what I know: If you're tired to your core and you find yourself stagnant as a leader, it is imperative that you act now on re-energizing. When talking doesn't help, I'd strongly encourage you to look for a reputable, impactful program, like ELE, to boost your spirits and motivation.

Here are a few things to consider if you feel like you can relate to any part of this tantalizing tale:

- *Know your village.* You've got to have people that you can trust and that genuinely care about you and your career in your life. Your village people might be at your job, they might be at home, they could be anywhere! But the key to knowing your village people is that you trust them enough to actually hear what they have to say; it might not be what you want to hear, but what you need to hear. You've got to be open to what guidance trusted people have to say (even if they want time to process the info and get back to you. {Thanks again, Dixon!}).
- *You ARE a Master, in spite of also being a Jill.* Guys, we're in education. We're ALL going to have our hand in a million things all the time, but we HAVE to honor our value. We have to build one another up as well as remind ourselves of what we have to bring to the table. If you've never taken time to do that, do it right now! You don't have to have a fancy survey identify your strengths. Think right now...what are they? Write them down on a post-it note by your computer. (You can thank me later.)
- *When you can't see the forest for the trees, look up.* Whether you're looking up to take a breath, say a prayer, yell a cuss word (in your head only if on a school campus), or just plain take a short break, do it. See bullet of consideration above for a reminder that you have a lot to do. It's ok that it gets overwhelming. It's not ok to not take a break so that you see each student in your class or each teacher in your school and see their needs. (I realize this sentence has a double negative... please look beyond that). Recharge yourself so that you can meet those needs.



Education Leaders Experience (ELE) Delta Class (2019 - 2020).

**Here's what I expect of myself moving forward:** Less. I'm hoping that I expect less of myself moving forward. I encourage you, too, to set realistic expectations of yourself. Goals that you can accomplish but also challenge you appropriately. I'll always struggle to some extent with crazy high expectations for myself, but now I know that I can stop for a moment and remember that I'm an important part of my team.

Am I still tired? Sure.

Are fires still burning? Yes.

Am I on my way out? Not in your wildest dreams.

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