

REFLECT

CENTER

GROW



IN THE MOMENT

A Word-a-Day Reflection
for School Leaders Navigating Crisis

WORDS

The Power of a Word



What is a single word which has stuck with you, like a friend or inspirational companion, which has helped to empower you through a challenging moment or season?

A single word can inspire, heal, or transform—offering a lifeline in crisis and leaving lasting impact. For this project, we’ve gathered words that have been meaningful as we’ve supported school leaders through unimaginable challenges. As contributors we know the isolation which can come with the responsibility of leading crisis response. It’s an experience shared by school leaders nationwide, shaping both careers and lives.

This interactive tool was created to support administrators navigating crises or *polycrises*. Presented in ten brief reflections, it can be used over two weeks or at your own pace. It’s not another task, but a quiet companion through the chaos. Each reflection includes an interactive element such as a song, video, or writing link, and space for journaling or sketching. It’s meant for you—to pause, reflect, and care for yourself so you can lead others well. Consider this tool your sidekick when navigating crisis.

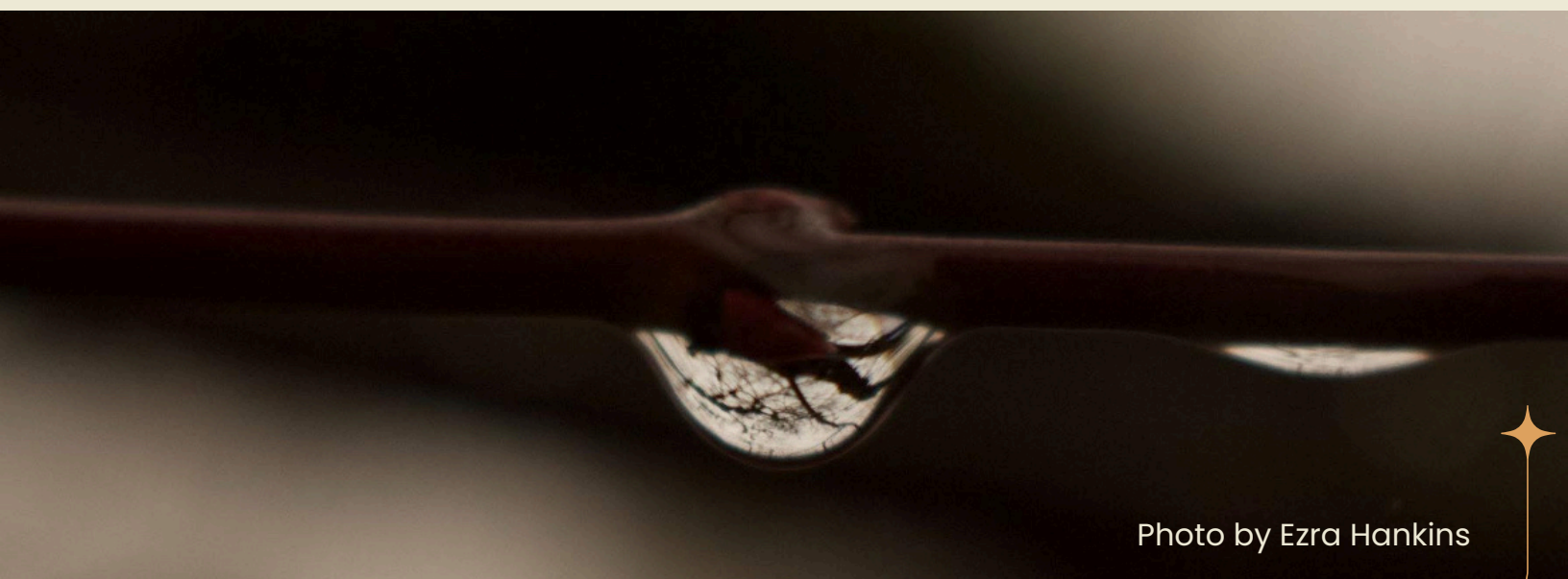


Photo by Ezra Hankins

HANDLING

“We do not have to become heroes overnight. Just a step at a time, meeting each thing that comes up, seeing it as not as dreadful as it appears, discovering that we have the strength to stare it down.”

--Eleanor Roosevelt

As a school leader in the midst of a crisis, the concept of "handling" takes on a deeply personal meaning. It requires an internal balance of emotional strength, adaptability, and responsibility. The weight of leading a community—students, teachers, staff, and parents—through uncertain times is profound, and the decisions you make will impact not only the immediate situation but the longer-term recovery and resilience of the school. One of the most challenging aspects of "handling" a crisis is staying composed when emotions run high. Whether it's the anxiety of parents, the stress of staff, or the uncertainty students face, it's important to remain calm and clear-headed.

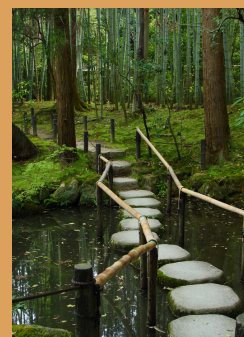
This doesn't mean suppressing your own feelings, but rather managing them so you can make thoughtful decisions under pressure. In these moments, remind yourself that your actions and demeanor set the tone for the entire school community. If you allow panic or frustration to dictate your responses, it will only amplify the crisis. In the end, "handling" a crisis as a school leader is not about managing everything perfectly, but about staying grounded, being adaptable, and leading with empathy and transparency. It's about guiding the school through the storm with resilience, knowing that how you handle yourself personally will shape the healing and growth of the entire community.

What do you want the school community to remember about your leadership during these early moments of crisis?

Remind Yourself

"I trust my instincts and experience to guide me through uncertain times."

"I am allowed to take things one step at a time, and I do not have to have all the answers right now."



NOTICING



What are you noticing?

In my years working to support school communities through crisis responses, my team would hold listening sessions to support impacted participants. Much of our time spent was allowing participants to take a moment to notice thoughts, reactions, and possible symptoms of stress in their body and behaviors.

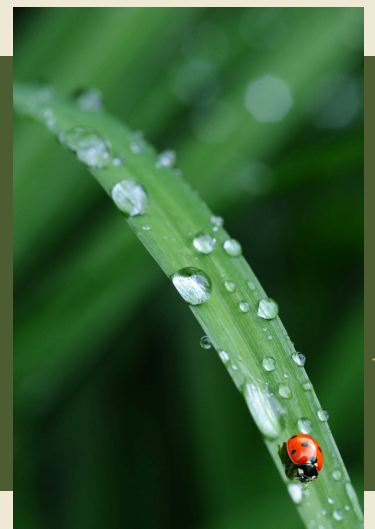
In this moment, you might wish use a similar practice of noticing how you are responding to stress. Please be gentle with yourself and remind yourself that *these are normal responses to abnormal events*.

In his conversation with Krista Tippett on the [On Being](#) podcast, **Resmaa Menakem** introduces a straightforward exercise to foster body awareness:

“Sit for a second. Just look straight ahead. As you’re looking straight ahead, just notice what is actually landed and what is still in the air. All you’re doing is noticing what’s happening.”

This practice encourages you to observe your bodily sensations and thoughts without judgment, promoting a deeper connection with your physical presence.

You can listen to the full conversation and guided practice [here](#).



BREATHING



When was the last time you mindfully took a deep breath?

In the months following the Covid 19 pandemic, my colleagues and I had the honor of holding virtual wellness spaces for essential workers. During one of the sessions we offered a facilitated meditation which focused on deep breathing. Following the exercise, one of the participants, who worked in public health, remarked that it was the first deep breath they had noticed taking all day.

It can be easy to go throughout our days surviving on short little breaths. By relying on short breaths, we deprive ourselves of breathing deeply. Especially in high stress working environments, it should come as no surprise when our lungs let out a big sigh as the end of our day draws near. It was in those wellness spaces in 2020 when I recall learning how to actually breathe from my belly and wondered to myself: How long had I been surviving on short breaths?

When leading through a crisis, we often forget the most basic and yet essential self care routines. Remembering to breathe should be high on our priority list alongside staying fed and hydrated. As the saying goes: Don't forget to breathe.

"Conscious breathing is
my anchor."

– Thích Nhất Hạnh



Photo by Ezra Hankins

For your reflection:

- For the rest of your day, try and take notice of your breathing. Are you resorting to using short breaths to get through a stressful interaction or are you remembering to give yourself a more fulfilling dose of oxygen?
- Listen to [Just Breathe \(2AM\)](#) by Anna Nalik.
- Consider exploring a local or online breathwork class.

PAUSING

“Through the sacred art of pausing, we develop the capacity to stop hiding, to stop running away from our experience. We begin to trust in our natural intelligence, in our naturally wise heart, in our capacity to open to whatever arises.” --Tara Brach

“In times of crisis, leaders are often expected to prioritize the needs of others, leaving little room to tend your own well-being. The practice of pausing offers a profound counterbalance to this reality... These moments of reflection offer you the opportunity to reconnect with your humanity and the meaning behind your work...

The impact of taking pause is profound: it enables you to resource yourself, step back, reflect, and ensure your actions are aligned with the long-term needs of those you serve. It protects against burnout and opens the door for authentic renewal, preventing the false starts that can arise when there is no time to stop and reflect.”

--*Leaning In and Leaning Out to Renew: Navigating Lived- Polycrisis School Leadership* (pgs. 16-17)



Tara Brach offers the acronym of **RAIN** as an easy-to-remember tool for bringing mindfulness and compassion to emotional difficulty. Use this offering as you reflect on how you are experiencing this moment. [Click here for an expanded version](#)

R—Recognize What’s Going On

Recognizing means consciously acknowledging, in any given moment, the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are affecting you.

A—Allow the Experience to be There, Just as It Is

Allowing means letting the thoughts, emotions, feelings, or sensations you have recognized simply be there, without trying to fix or avoid anything.

I—Investigate with Interest and Care

You might ask yourself: What most wants attention? How am I experiencing this in my body? What am I believing? What does this vulnerable place want from me? What does it most need?

N—Nurture with Self-Compassion

Experiment and see which intentional gesture of kindness most helps to comfort, soften or open your heart. It might be the mental whisper, *I’m here with you. I’m sorry, and I love you. I love you, and I’m listening. It’s not your fault. Trust in your goodness.*

In addition to a whispered message of care, many people find healing by gently placing a hand on the heart or cheek; or by envisioning being bathed in or embraced by warm, radiant light. If it feels difficult to offer yourself love, bring to mind a loving being—spiritual figure, family member, friend or pet—and imagine that being’s love and wisdom flowing into you.

UNRAVELING

Do you have what you need to fall apart?

“Tears don’t always just fall; sometimes they just rip through you, like storm-painted gusts instead of mere raindrops.” – Saeed Jones

“Crises often amplify stress and unresolved emotions, making emotional activation—intense reactions triggered by stress or trauma—an inevitable part of crisis leadership for both leaders and those they support.”

--*Leaning In and Leaning Out to Renew: Navigating Lived- Polycrisis School Leadership* (pg.17)

“What Holds Me”

Visual Collage or Mind Map

STEP 1: On a large piece of paper (or digitally), write the question in the center: “Do I have what I need to fall apart?”

STEP 2: Around it, add words, images, symbols, or colors that represent what supports you—friends, routines, creative outlets, etc.

STEP 3: Identify any gaps—are there things missing that you wish you had?

How can this help? It is a visual reminder of your resources and where you may need to build more support.

UNRAVELING PLAYLIST

Click on the image to play

Featured songs:

1. There is a Light that Never Goes Out - The Smiths
2. Flagpole Sitta - Harvey Danger
3. Aquí No Es Así - Caifanes
4. Anxiety - Doechii
5. I Don't Want to Know - Fleetwood Mac

**Feel free to add your favorites!*



METABOLIZING

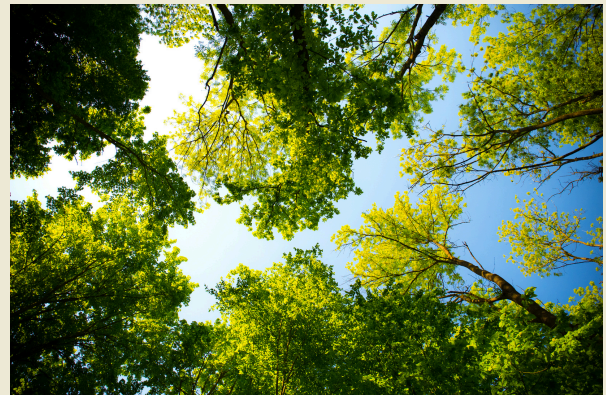
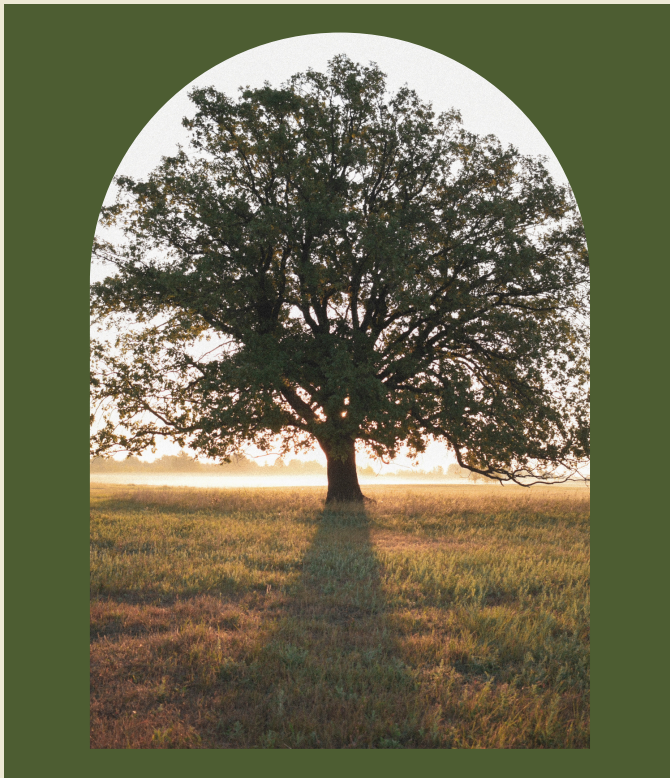


How do you tend to metabolize stress while navigating crisis?

Metabolism is most often referred to in the physical nature of how one's body processes different types of food and turns it into fuel or waste. According to Webster, metabolism is defined as the chemical processes within an organism in order to maintain life.

While we may not think about stress in the same way we think about food, what we do know about stress is how it increases our cortisol levels. When the human brain develops too much cortisol, it will trigger an oftentimes physical or behavioral symptom to release the excess cortisol. If we aren't able to metabolize the cortisol through more preventative or responsive practices, it can have a tendency to leak out in more reactive ways.

For more on cortisol, checkout this [Ted Talk animation on How Stress Affects Your Brain by Madhumita Murgia](#)



GROUNDING

What is something that is helping, or has helped you, to cope in moments of stress?

***“You wanna fly, you gotta give up the shit that weighs you down.”
Toni Morrison, Song of Solomon***

“...repair becomes an integral part of healing—for both the community and the leader. It’s not about preventing harm but learning to address it when it arises, fostering stronger relationships and nurturing a culture of trust and care..”

--*Leaning In and Leaning Out to Renew: Navigating Lived- Polycrisis School Leadership* (pg.18)

Grounding Activity

1. Name what is happening: “I am feeling -----”
2. Breathwork: (see Breathing on page 4)
3. Music for reset: Listen to the playlist below
4. Movement: Walk, stretch, stand outside and breathe
5. Emote: Cry, Yell, Laugh, etc
6. Focus: Find one small manageable task (ie: drink water, reply to ONE message, clean the top of your desk, etc)



GROUNDING PLAYLIST

Click on the image to play

Featured songs:

1. Running Up That Hill - Kate Bush
2. Like a Ship - Pastor T.L.Barrett and the Youth for Christ Choir
3. Todo Cambia - Mercedes Sosa
4. Hold On - Alabama Shakes
5. This Joy - Resistance Revival Chorus
6. Let Things Go - Caamp

**Feel free to add your favorites!*

HOLDING

“Anytime we can listen to our true self and give the care it requires, we do it not only for ourselves, but for the many others whose lives we touch.” --Parker Palmer

In 2015, [Heather Plett](#) wrote a [blog post](#) about the concept of “holding space” and explained “it means that we are willing to walk alongside another person in whatever journey they’re on without judging them, making them feel inadequate, trying to fix them, or trying to impact the outcome. When we hold space for other people, we open our hearts, offer unconditional support, and let go of judgement and control.”

A week later, Plett shared a [post](#) explaining how people can also “hold space” for themselves. She writes, “give yourself permission to trust your own intuition. Give yourself only as much information as you can handle. Don’t let anyone take your power away. Keep your ego out of it.”

Make yourself feel safe enough to fail. Give guidance and help to yourself with humility and thoughtfulness. Create your own container for complex emotions, fears, trauma, etc. And allow yourself to make decisions that are different from what other people would make.”

As you navigate this crisis, you have permission to hold space for yourself in the midst of holding space for others. Your well-being is as equally important as the well-being of those with whom you work. While it may feel counter-intuitive, when you hold space for yourself, you are modeling the “both/and” of the human aspect of the crisis experience. You can feel your emotions and be vulnerable while also remaining steady in your leadership.

Set one intention for today

for how you can hold space for yourself using the examples below as inspiration.

I will create space for a quick, reflective moment before making any important decisions, allowing myself to tune into my intuition.

I will allow myself to take a short break when I feel overwhelmed, even if it's just stepping outside for a few minutes.

Take a deep breath and remind yourself that you are doing the best you can and that's enough.



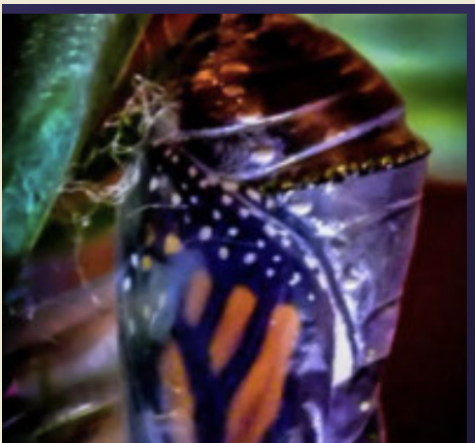
Am I practicing self-compassion by acknowledging the complexity of my emotions without criticizing myself for feeling overwhelmed or uncertain?

EVOLVING



“In what ways have I been resisting change, even when I know it’s necessary?”

“We delight in the beauty of the butterfly, but rarely admit the changes it has gone through to achieve that beauty.” – Maya Angelou



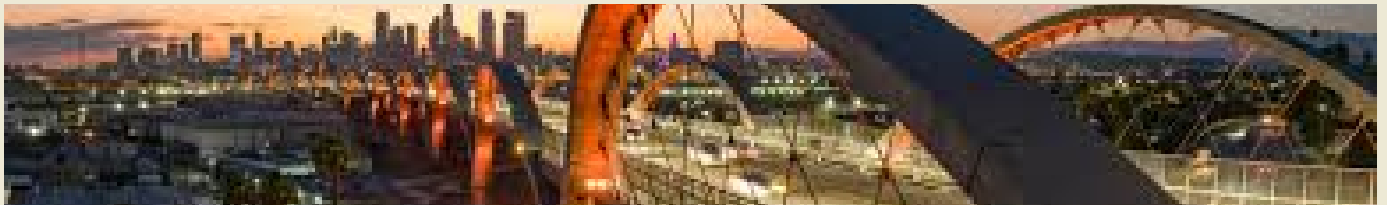
EVOLVING PLAYLIST

Click on the cocoon image to play

Featured songs:

1. This is the Day - The The
2. Closer - Goapele
3. Ahora - Bomba Estéreo
4. More than This - Roxy Music

**Feel free to add your favorites!*



“One leader spoke to the significance of slowing down inside her particular identities, and the need to really “stand her ground” to shift generational and cultural patterns formed in response to systemic violence. For another interviewee, slowing down the hustle and claiming space “to talk about mental health or ask someone to hold you... these are trailblazing acts.”

--Leaning In and Leaning Out to Renew: Navigating Lived- Polycrisis School Leadership (pg.18)

Click on the image of the bridge to engage in a reflection activity



YOUR WORD

“The magic of words is that they have power to do more than convey meaning; not only do they have the power to make things clear, they make things happen.”

--Frederick Buechner

Words have a way of anchoring us when the ground shifts.

In the heart of a school crisis, when clarity is clouded and emotions run high, sometimes it's not full sentences that hold us—it's a single word.

Steady. Together. Hope. Calm. Patience.

Focus. Presence. Listen. Pivot.

One word can be a lifeline. A quiet mantra repeated in the hallway. A touchstone in the middle of chaos. A reminder of who you are and why you're here.

As leaders, we often feel pressure to say the right thing, to craft the perfect message. But in the most difficult moments, it's often one word that carries the weight. One word that grounds us. One word that gives just enough strength to take the next step.

***What was your word
when everything felt like
too much?***

***What word will you
carry forward?***

Compiled By...

Jonathan Hankins, QMHA II (he/they)

Jonathan is an LGBTQIA2S+ Wraparound Care Coordinator for youth and families in Multnomah County. Jonathan has recently returned to this passion after serving close to five years working in the nonprofit sector coordinating Suicide Rapid Response for the State of Oregon. Jonathan and his high school aged son are native to rural Southern Oregon before heading across the state to beautiful, Portland Oregon - which has been home for almost a decade. In addition to suicide pre/postvention and systems of care work, Jonathan has served as co-chair for the Lethal Means Committee for the Oregon Alliance to Prevent suicide - an incredible group of humans who have successfully put forward multiple recommendations and life-saving initiatives to legislation. Prior to finding a career in behavioral healthcare, Jonathan served several years as a volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocate for children in foster care. When taking time away from doing work he loves, he rejuvenates by spending time exploring the great outdoors with his son and their dog. Otherwise you might find him on a paddleboard or dancing with friends at a music festival.



Claudia Rojas, M.Ed. (she/her/ella)

International Newcomer Instructional Coach, Los Angeles Unified School District, Los Angeles, CA

Claudia is committed to student voice, social justice, equity and access, innovation, and community collaboration. She has been an educator since 2003 and has always worked at high-needs schools in Los Angeles. Claudia taught social studies for 9 years; during the last two years of teaching, she helped to open a school focused on social justice. In 2012, Claudia helped to open another school in South Central Los Angeles, this time serving as the principal. The school opened with a mental/behavioral health pathway after the community expressed a need for more practitioners in this field. After 6 years as a principal, she transitioned into restorative justice work. Since 2020, Claudia has served as an International Newcomer Instructional Coach where she supports teachers of high school students who have arrived to the U.S. recently. She is looking forward to her next career venture where she will serve as a Teacher Librarian beginning in August of 2025.



Jennifer L. Price, MSW, LCSW (she/her)

Social Services Coordinator and Foster Care Liaison for Broken Arrow Public Schools, Broken Arrow, OK

In her role, Jennifer assists students and families with connecting to resources to meet their needs, she leads the district's Social Services Team, she co-coordinates the school-based mental health providers, and she serves on the crisis response team. Additionally, she participates in various community mental health coalitions. Jennifer has served as a school social worker for 12 years in public schools including Tulsa Public Schools and Milwaukee Public Schools. Prior to venturing into the school setting, Jennifer worked with both survivors and perpetrators of domestic violence through Domestic Violence Intervention Services. She also has 8 years of experience training and supporting kinship, foster, and adoptive families during her time at the National Resource Center for Youth Services. Jennifer earned her B.S. in Sociology from Oklahoma City University and her Master's in Social Work from the University of Oklahoma.

