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**M**y heart still plummets to my stomach when I remember her cry, “But Miss McGarrell, I listened to your voice!” Her words, filled with incredulity and disappointment, cut like a knife and stung. All I could do was apologize and remind her that “This was just a simulation.”

Each year, students at the school where I taught were invited to participate with 70 other high school students in a region-wide leadership retreat for student leaders. The retreat took place at a remote encampment, far away from the bustling city. The presentations and activities that weekend focused not only on the voices that lead but challenged the attendees to pay attention to the voices they followed. In one afternoon session, the program planners launched a simulation to illustrate the theme. Students were divided into groups, blindfolded, and told to follow the instructions of their assigned group leader; the leader would guide them to a site designated as their “eternal home,” representing eternal life. They were warned that although they might hear other voices, they should follow the voice of their leader since the other voices would be intent on leading them elsewhere—to “eternal death.” Those assigned as group leaders were instructed to use verbal cues or physical ones, if necessary, to ensure that their flock made it from the main meeting lodge to the other side of the encampment.

The remaining adult chaperones and sponsors were given the task of being other voices—those that produced a counter message from the one being broadcast by the designated leaders. The adults were given the freedom to use any means necessary to distract. The simulation’s initial launch was chaotic—many voices clamoring for attention and blindfolded participants unsure of whether to turn right or left. However, soon, out of the chaos arose a loosely ordered group of individuals leaving the lodge. As freezing rain drizzled from the gray October sky and the cold, crisp wind penetrated every layer of clothing, several colleagues and I determined that we would not walk the three-mile-long trail trying to distract the participants and inveigle them to follow

## “Do You Know the Shepherd’s Voice?”

our voices. So, we colluded with one of the bus drivers to start one of the vehicles and get the heat going. We then proceeded to cajole, in soothing tones, several of the participants to join us on the bus. “There’s no need to walk in the cold”; “Come with us; the bus is warm!” and “Join us! We’re going where you’re going.” Several resisted, chased us away, or told us to go tempt someone else. However, 25 listened, and we carted them off to the encampment site designated as eternal death.

As our band of captives sat in the bus, singing, chatting, and enjoying the warmth, the gravity of what we had accomplished began to weigh heavily on me—and also on my colleagues. We knew it was a simulation. We knew that this was not real. Yet, we knew that our students, oblivious to where the vehicle was going, were on that bus because they recognized our voices, and they did not imagine that we would lead them astray. During the debriefing, there were many tears as both students and sponsors weighed the magnitude of our words, the power of our influence, and each individual’s personal responsibility to critique the voices that lead and those we follow.

My student’s cry remains a constant reminder for me even today as the assault on education, both public and private, continues to spiral, twist, and bend amidst the challenging societal climate. There are so many voices demanding attention, postulating what should be taught, how and when it should be taught, and to or by whom. The issues continue to escalate: from debates about access and funding education globally to critical race theory and “wokeness” in schools and politicians demanding curriculum revisions; from mental and physical health crises facing students and teachers, Pre-K through higher education, to an increase in war and environmental disasters that threaten to suspend schooling for millions, especially girls; and, from persistent gun violence in U.S. schools to the infiltration of hardcore drugs in appealing packages (e.g., candy-colored fentanyl-laced pills and fruit-flavored vaping pens). Add to this the ravages of a global pandemic—the impact of which is yet to be fully grasped—and educators face the seemingly

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