

PETER GREER AND JILL HEISEY

FOREWORD BY CHRIS HORST, COAUTHOR OF *MISSION DRIFT*



# HOW LEADERS LOSE THEIR WAY

AND HOW TO MAKE SURE IT  
DOESN'T HAPPEN TO YOU



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## THE DANGER OF DRIFT



*Let your eyes look straight ahead; fix your gaze directly before you. Give careful thought to the paths for your feet and be steadfast in all your ways. Do not turn to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil.*

PROVERBS 4:25-27

It's been two decades since I heard my grandfather's wooden casket clunk against earthen walls, but I vividly remember the details of cemetery staff lowering his body into the ground. The graveside service had ended, and our family overstayed, not yet ready to say goodbye to this precious man whose prayers and life consistently pointed us upward. My gaze lingered on a waiting backhoe that hovered nearby.

The workers assigned the grim task of burying my grandfather didn't know that he was the keeper of a thousand family memories. They'd never witnessed his delight in tossing his grandchildren into

the air just to see them laugh, listened in on the ping-pong lessons he imparted, or glimpsed the sparkle in his eyes when he told a story. They couldn't have known the countless ways he had cared for his wife since the day they said "I do," or how this regal woman had collapsed in grief at the hospital saying "Don't you leave me, Jerold" as his soul left his body.

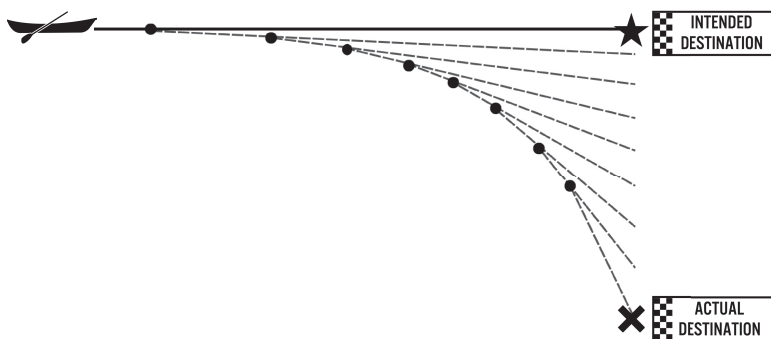
I knew all of that, and in the days following my grandfather's death, I learned still more. My grandfather spent his life shepherding a small Philadelphia congregation, impacting others' lives with little fanfare and great faithfulness. At his memorial service, those who came to remember him described how he prayed with conviction, played with joy, loved without judgment, and truly cared for people. In summary, his life was one marked by loving God and loving neighbor. He lived on mission and finished well. I have no doubt that he heard the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:23).

Though I'd gained professional clarity on HOPE's mission some years earlier, my grandfather's funeral offered personal clarity. It forced me to follow the rather morbid recommendation of the sixth-century abbot Saint Benedict: "Day by day remind yourself that you are going to die."<sup>1</sup> My grandfather's life and death offered an invitation to pause and consider where my priorities and daily decisions might be leading.

While ministry was thriving, I was traveling too much and I was willing to do more. Growth and advancing HOPE's mission had become so important to me that I was regularly giving God and my family my leftovers. Time in prayer and study of Scripture was marginalized and—in practice, if not in lip service—less vital than all the "important work" I had to do. Evenings at home were sacrificed for nights on the road, sharing how parents in faraway places were able

to invest in their children as they accessed financial services and experienced the hope of the gospel.

From the outside, perhaps I seemed to be thriving too. Nothing was obviously amiss or blatantly wrong, but in moments of honest reflection, I could recognize that small compromises had subtly recalibrated my course. My relatively minor scheduling decisions were, in the aggregate, taking a toll on my soul. I was working hard but losing my way, pursuing organizational growth strategies without similar intentionality around what mattered still more. Compounded by time, the gap between my current trajectory and a faithful finish was growing and would continue to grow. I was living the very definition of drift, and without conscious course correction, I was not going to finish well.



## ADRIFT

Leaders seem to routinely get caught in currents that pull them away from missional alignment. Whether it's happened to us, someone we know and love, or someone we've admired from a distance, we've all seen a leader *drastically*, *dramatically* lose their way as though caught in a rip tide.

We see Christian leaders with decades of service and thriving ministries lose their reputation and others' respect through a series of

poor decisions. We read of business leaders who achieve the highest levels of prosperity but are caught in financial scandals and forced out in humiliation. We hear beautiful sermons about grace and love from the lips of those we later learn treated staff members abusively. We see pastors who dutifully shepherd their congregation while neglecting their own soul.

But we never think it will happen to us.

We don't stop to consider how we might be similarly at risk, as we play in currents without realizing their strength. Blissfully unaware, we wade into dangerous waters. Even when we spot drift in others, we still splash in the waves. Too seldom do we pay attention to the warning signs.

We live surrounded by currents that carry us to places we never intended to go, and currents have the same function as rip tides. They're less dramatic. They feel gentler and more innocuous, but they still carry us off course. Small acts of faithfulness or compromise determine our destination, and drift is all the more dangerous because it is subtle.

Although the twenty-four-hour news cycle may have heightened our awareness of prominent leaders' integrity failures and poor finishes, personal drift is neither new nor rare. People have sought to justify compromise since Adam and Eve found a way to rationalize that first bite (Genesis 3). A consistent theme of personal mission drift courses through Scripture, with faithful leadership as the exception rather than the norm. When leadership scholar J. Robert Clinton studied biblical leaders, he found that only 30 percent "finished well," which he defined as "walking with God in a vibrant personal relationship, developing the potential God has given to its appropriate capacity, and leaving behind an ultimate contribution that is both pleasing to God and established by Him."<sup>2</sup>

When Clinton applied the same criteria to more than twelve hundred historical and contemporary leaders, he reached the disturbing conclusion that “evidence from today indicates that this ratio is probably generous. Probably less than one in three are finishing well today.”<sup>3</sup> Through conversations with friends who have vulnerably recounted their own stories of drift, I’ve come to believe that Clinton’s assessment remains shockingly accurate. Drift is the default.

Feeling the pull in my own life, I wanted to understand what causes leaders to drift. Why those who start well don’t always finish well. How rational people make irrational choices and even seemingly noble pursuits can lead us off course. Perhaps still more important, I wanted to understand what might keep us from drifting. Is there something fundamentally different about the one in three who finishes well?

When Jill and I thought of avoiding drift, we first thought of a boat dropping anchor. But the more we learned, the more we recognized the inadequacy of that illustration. At best, anchors keep us where we are. Anchors are not dynamic. To finish well, we’ll need oars, not anchors.

## ROWING ON MISSION

For a few years I lived near the Charles River in Cambridge, Massachusetts. As often as time allowed, I’d bike along the river so I could catch a glimpse of crew teams practicing. I’ve always been awed by the illusion of boats gliding atop the water as rowers plunge their oars beneath the surface in perfect synchronicity.

I’ve always wanted to try the sport, and on a recent summer day, Jill and I had the opportunity. Along with some HOPE colleagues, we donned matching crew T-shirts and looked the part when we arrived in Princeton, New Jersey, to spend a day on the water. First, we

learned the basic mechanics on indoor rowing machines. It seemed easy enough. Yet within an instant of getting on the water, our unfounded confidence collided with our very unstable reality.

It seemed any shift in body weight threatened to capsize the boat. The shell swayed precariously. Despite our instructors' uncommon patience and thorough explanations, our oars splashed and occasionally collided as we aimlessly meandered around the lake. Several hours into our lesson, at our peak performance, our boat lurched back and forth like a one-year-old learning to walk. We laughed a lot, overstretched our muscles, and developed a new appreciation for the skill rowing requires. Never again will we associate the word *effortless* with rowing!

Observing experienced rowers from a distance is deceptive. There is nothing easy about keeping the boat headed toward the finish line. Most of the time our little crew team was so consumed with the mechanics of rowing that we forgot to even consider where we were headed!

This experience became an object lesson in how complex and challenging an endeavor it is to stay on mission with far more at stake than a trophy or ribbon. Fixated on the mechanics of daily life and leadership, we can lose sight of where we're headed. From a distance, we might see people we respect living and leading faithfully. Perhaps it seems easy and natural, but it takes far more work than we might imagine to train our souls for a life on mission.

Living on mission requires clarity, dedication, and real effort. We can expect some awkward lurches, but knowing our destination and wholeheartedly rowing is the only way forward. Acquiescing to drift never leads to missional faithfulness in our organizations or our lives. If we desire to stay on mission, we must be prepared for courageous commitments and bold actions.

## START WITH THE END IN MIND

My grandfather's funeral prompted me to ask, "Where is my path leading? And is that where I want to end up?" As one author wrote thousands of years ago, it is better to go to a house in mourning than to a house party because we live differently today when we keep the end in view (see Ecclesiastes 7:2).

A few months after the service, I sat down at my kitchen table one Saturday morning and penned my own eulogy. As I pondered what I hoped would be true of me at the time of my death, the exercise clarified what mattered most. What I wrote had nothing to do with professional accomplishments. In my eulogy, there was no mention of titles, jobs, or degrees. Instead, I wrote of relationships and gratitude to God and others. I wrote about the life that I would live if I were focused on remembering my Creator and living on mission faithfully to the end. It was shorter and simpler than I would have imagined, because as I focused on what truly mattered, so much of what I've striven for didn't make the cut.

The exercise could have been no more than a depressing way to spend a Saturday morning, but it became a significant moment. Sitting at the kitchen table, I wept as I wrote. For the first time, I had clarity on paper about what truly mattered. Perhaps the exercise was a little macabre, but it brought life into sharper clarity.

Writing my eulogy clarified the destination and helped me identify course corrections that I needed to make. Documenting my desired end slowly began to change the way I live.

## DEFINING OUR MISSION

Focused on the impact I wanted to have at work, I was losing sight of my broader mission, to the detriment of my faith and my family. As I contemplated what it meant to finish well, I realized there were higher

allegiances than my organizational allegiance—and this is true of every follower of Jesus. Our mission comes from Christ himself in the Greatest Commandment: to love God and to love others (Matthew 22:37-40).

This mission is, of course, broad. It doesn't tell us where to work or how to invest our time. But it does give us the framework through which every other decision must be evaluated. It says that we must rightly order our priorities if we are to live rightly, so we don't pursue good things at the expense of better things.

I'm reminded of a hierarchy proposed by the fourth-century Northern African bishop Augustine, who defined virtue as “the order of love”—or desires put in their proper place. Augustine argues, “We do well to love that which, when we love it, makes us live well and virtuously.”<sup>4</sup> Only God meets that criteria.

When I finished writing my eulogy, I knew where I wanted to go, but course correcting is not a one-time activity. It continues to be a work in progress, as I live every day with the end in mind. Each year on my birthday, a calendar reminder prompts me to review my eulogy, reflecting on the past year and recalibrating for the next. I remind myself that my earthly life has an expiration date and then ask what course corrections are needed to finish well.

If we want to live on mission, we need clarity about where we're heading. It's easy to lose our way if we haven't defined our destination. Mission-true leaders know their destination.

## ALIGNED ACTIONS

Once we have clarity on our destination, we also need to understand what will be required to bridge the gap between knowing and doing, aligning our actions and decisions with our mission, connecting what we do today with our eventual destination. Goals without tenacious commitments are almost never achieved. Staying on mission

requires intentionality and discipline. It is rarely a gentle row down the stream.

The Charles River is home not only to many crew team practices but also to one of the world's premier crew events. Hundreds of teams compete in the Head of the Charles Regatta each October, and I've had the privilege of watching several races. Once, positioned near the race's end, I saw these athletes straining for the finish line, slumping over their oars in exhaustion once they had crossed it. Finishing well demanded their all.

We know that's not just true in rowing; it's true of any athletic pursuit. We expect it to be difficult and our muscles to be tired. We expect bruises and strains, and we know it takes preparation and strenuous training to compete. A lifelong New England sports fan, I smiled as I listened to Tom Brady's Patriots Hall of Fame induction speech. "To be successful at anything," he counseled, "you just have to be what most people aren't: consistent, determined, and willing to work for it. No shortcuts."<sup>5</sup>

We understand the same principle applies to music, art, and professional achievement, but too often, with our life's direction, we think it should come easily, naturally, or automatically. The reality is that living faithfully takes effort. "Is life less than a boat race?" Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. asked. "If a man will give all the blood in his body to win the one, will he not spend all the might of his soul to prevail in the other?"<sup>6</sup> Staying mission true requires both clear direction and discipline. We must know where we're going and maintain the diligence to get there.

It also requires balance. When our motley crew team first climbed into our shell that August morning, we had not trained for rowing and were clearly not in peak physical condition. We had no clear direction and made no real progress toward any

particular destination. But more than that, we barely stayed in the boat as we fought for balance. Several times, Jill and I felt sure we'd end up in the lake. Our instructor would comment that we were listing toward port, and we'd immediately overcompensate, pitching starboard.

Leaders face the same impulse. When we become aware of our tendencies and temptations, our natural impulse may be to lean so hard in the other direction that we still haven't achieved the balance that will allow us to live and lead on mission. We can go from treating a good thing as an ultimate thing (idolatry) to treating a good thing as a bad thing (disdain). Staying on mission requires balance, as we'll continue to explore in the chapters to come.

It's worth repeating: living on mission will not be easy, but soberly considering the impact of personal drift provides clarity on just how much is at stake.

## LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Not long after writing my aspirational eulogy, I found myself listening to a leader as he shared a sharply contrasting story about a series of humbling experiences that derailed his life, family, and reputation. I had the utmost respect for his willingness to share, and, with remorse and tremendous self-awareness, he acknowledged the many small compromises he'd made. It wasn't one major mistake, he explained, but rather a long series of small, unwise attitudes and actions that led to a disastrous destination. It was unopposed currents, not a rip tide. It was drift.

As I listened to his story, it wasn't difficult to vicariously experience his pain. My friend and mentor Terry Looper often says that it always takes pain to truly change. While that is undoubtedly true, I've often wondered if it's possible to learn from the pain of others

to avoid repeating their mistakes. In the words of author and leadership expert Jim Collins, “Better to learn from how others fell than to repeat their mistakes out of ignorance.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps feeling some measure of this leader’s pain could prompt a change in me as well.

I imagined being in exactly the same situation, where my personal drift had devastated those I love most. I imagined losing my wife’s trust. I imagined looking into my children’s eyes and describing a series of harmful decisions I had made. I imagined the impact on colleagues and the loss of reputation and credibility. In truth, it wasn’t hard to imagine.

Others’ unwise decisions are an invitation to examine where (not if) we are making unwise decisions. The proper response isn’t *schadenfreude* (taking pleasure in others’ failures) or detached sympathy but humble introspection.

Each leader who has experienced drift could likely recount stories of others who lost their way. Too often, the problem is not ignorance but arrogance—believing it could never happen to us. Avoiding personal mission drift begins with an acknowledgment that *we* are prone to wander, that these stories could be our stories, that there is no immunity. “There but for the grace of God go I.”

There is too much at stake to avoid diving deeply into the realities of drift and how it derails leaders. Our prayer is that this book will equip you to assess where you might need recalibration, shift your perspectives and routines, and develop the disciplines that will help you stay on mission. The end of each chapter includes prayers from our friend Ryan Skoog, as well as specific ideas and exercises to help in this pursuit.

Living on mission begins with a clear destination and the conviction that our finish line is faithfulness. Are you ready to do the

work that will be required to remain mission true? If so, I invite you to grab an oar. Let's get ready to row.

## PRAYER

Good Father,

teach me the rhythm of returning to you, Lord and friend,  
again and again.

In hurried moments and rushed seasons,  
my heart has slowly slipped,  
little by little, without my notice.

Holy Spirit, reveal to me,  
show me how I've strayed from your path:  
in my thoughts  
in my desires  
in my attitudes.

*(Pause and listen)*

Holy God, draw me home.  
Show me how I've strayed from your presence:  
in my schedule  
in my focus  
in my daily disciplines.

*(Pause and listen)*

Draw me back in kindness, in grace, in clarity and love,  
as you always do, as you always promise.  
How enduring and persevering are your forgiveness and grace.  
How merciful, how patient, you are with us, perfect Jesus.

—*Ryan Skoog*





## FINDING OUR WAY—WRITE YOUR EULOGY

Writing your own eulogy is a profound way to clarify what matters most. What do you hope to be true about your life?

**Picture this:** Imagine attending your own celebration of life. What qualities do you hope friends and family members would recognize in you? Create a list of the people you would want to be present and the virtues, attitudes, actions, and mission for which you want to be remembered.

| YOUR CELEBRATION OF LIFE   |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| Friends and family present | Notable virtues, attitudes, and actions |
|                            |   |

**Put it in writing:** Take time to write your own eulogy by following the prompts:

1. *From others' perspectives:*

- What significant memories, milestones, or characteristics would be shared by your parents, siblings, spouse, close friends, children, or colleagues?
- What attributes do you hope will be recognized?

2. *Your life's work:*

- How do these contributions reflect your love for God and neighbor?

3. *Consider your fears:*

- List a few things you fear could be said of you if you strayed from your mission. What do these fears reveal about any recalibrations God may be inviting you to make?

**Review:** Consider sharing your draft with a trusted friend or family member. Set a calendar reminder to read and reflect on your written eulogy annually. Place an object in a visible area as a prayer prompt to, “Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (Psalm 90:12).

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