EPISODE 01

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:05] ANNOUNCER: You are listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders; leadership conversations that explore adapting and thriving in a complex world with Rick Torseth, and guests.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:00:19] RT: Hey, everybody. It's Rick Torseth with 10,000 Swap Leaders Podcast. Today, it is my great pleasure to have on the program a friend of mine, Mike Staresinic, who is originally from Pittsburgh, still is in Pittsburgh, but as you're going to learn over the course of our conversation, he's been around the world multiple times. Michael, welcome to the program. Thank you for joining us.

[00:00:42] MS: Rick, it's great to be here. Especially somebody told me this might be your first podcast. Let's go at it.

[00:00:48] RT: Let's get at it then. As you know, this is about leadership. I know your long history that you're going to share with these people, your journey on leading. Let's start right at the top. As you sit here right now, based in your experience, how do you define leading and leadership?

[00:01:03] MS: What a great question to start with. I think, leadership is action when action is required. Full stop. That's the shortest and simplest definition. That means, when it's time for somebody to lead, if you step up and do something, that could be called leadership. I was so happy to – I'll try to be short here, but I think I learned that in action. I was doing things and not sure what I was doing. I went back and reflected on it later in my journals, in a class I had at the Kennedy School. When some of the instructors there said, leadership is not a position, it's not a role, it's an action. You either do it when it's called for or not. It was one of the aha moments of my life about 20 years ago. I've pretty much stuck with that.

[00:01:46] RT: Hang on a sec. I know the school you're at. You studied with Marty Linsky, Heifetz, *Adaptive Leadership*, Harvard. You know that that's a big influence for me. What I'm hearing you say is, you are actually having experiences and making choices to lead that were in advance of actually having been exposed to that concept through the work at Harvard.

[00:02:09] MS: Absolutely. I just led a life of doing things. Then I went back and reflected on them. That's been my pattern and my model. We can understand that some people have – I have contended, and I think you picked up the soundbite that I may have gotten from Linsky, or David Jurgen as somebody that leadership can't be taught, that it can be learned.

[00:02:27] RT: Say more about that.

[00:02:29] MS: Number one, how do we really learn? When I was a young man in the Peace Corps, there was some model we picked up that said, the best ways are to learn by experience. Then experience and/or association with an already understood model. We learned by doing. When we do, we say, "Wait a second, did that happen to me once before? Or is that similar to, or different than something that's already in my memory bank?" I suspect it goes all the way back to the beginning, early childhood experiences and things.

I took that as an encouragement. Go do things. Say yes to good things. See what happens and see what you can learn from it. That's been my pattern. I went back to the Oxford and I should say, CCC program in a similar way. What just happened to me? That's been the pattern. What just happened to me? Then I go back and have some reflection.

[00:03:19] RT: I want to capture this reflection process you're using, but I want to put it in a context of how you got to be where you are. Let's come back to that if that's okay. I know you grew up in Pittsburgh, and I know that growing up in Pittsburgh had a significant impact on your life, and your direction and where you are today. Take the people who are listening a little bit on a journey from Pittsburgh to where you traveled in your work, how you came to be in this work. Then, we'll pick it apart based on how you lay it out.

[00:03:49] MS: Oh, my gosh. I hope I can do that justice. Thank you for the opportunity. Let's think about that, picking up on the last point. If I waited for an instructor to say, action is what

you do, not what you say. I went, “Aha, let me go and be a leader.” I would have been 43 years old, and not having done anything to that point.

It's really about, if you go way back, if Leadership is action when it's needed, we're starting to set some of those patterns from a very, very young life. If I can, well look at Pittsburgh from my early formative years, and we have a couple minutes that might go into my high school years, and then my college years, which fit the patterns, if that makes sense.

[00:04:28] RT: Yeah. Go ahead. Go ahead.

[00:04:30] MS: Okay, thank you. We grew up in diverse communities at a challenging time. The city was full of ethnic neighborhoods. The 30% foreign born, all had children and grandchildren, so we are Pittsburghers, but from this mixed tapestry and a quilt of neighborhoods, which were on the one hand, in the early 70s, we were inheriting the results of the civil rights movement. We were seeing great progress in every way. Neighborhoods were slowly being integrated, but not without competition and resistance.

These ethnic neighborhoods were resisting the gains of the civil rights movement. The same time, we had a tight community, where everybody seemed to be on the same side. We went to church, we went to school, we were taught to do the right thing. I saw my parents, especially my father, not only my father, but especially my father, the lesson was ‘always help people who need help’. Then that included my mother and the parish and the community.

Then, as you get towards the end of your grade school years, you have the possibility to question those assumptions. You see what happens in Sunday is not what happens from Monday to Saturday. Children want to question and say, “What's going on here?” I resolved that in high school in two ways. Number one, going out of that neighborhood, 12 neighborhoods fit into this big high school. Peabody High School. A legendary High School in Pittsburgh in so many ways; academics and sports, integration and social challenges.

2,000 of us were thrown into this mix. We faced every urban challenge that anybody could think of in the 70s to early 80s. With a positive spirit, a winning spirit, it was a lot of teamwork. When I talk to my school was half black, half white and half Italian and not good at fractions. I

talked to my black classmates. There were a 1,000 African-Americans and a 1,000 white kids in one school, and everybody remembers this. This is a golden era.

Yes, there were problems. Everything was getting better and we expected it to get better. That was the pattern. People remember joy and love and good ethnic relations, even though there were challenges, of course. We expected the future to get better. This was one of the best experiences and people who look back on their city public education, often have great memories when it's a good school and a good school district. That's what Pittsburgh was.

There were many school districts like that in the 70s. This is before the crack challenge hit, and before the gangs challenge hit with the Crips and Bloods. That came in the 80s. That changed how people felt about schooling. What a great way to reconcile what I was hearing on Sunday, and when I was living on Monday. I was going a step further, but I can stop there. Yeah.

[00:07:07] RT: Yeah. You stay in Pittsburgh to go to college. Why –

[00:07:09] MS: I went three hours away.

[00:07:11] RT: That's right. Penn State.

[00:07:12] MS: Yeah.

[00:07:13] RT: Yeah. Okay. What happened at Penn State in forming –

[00:07:16] MS: The context there is when I started high school, there were 425,000 people in Pittsburgh. When I finished high school, there were about 325,000. The CO industry collapsed in the interim. I saw some anniversary newspaper a couple years ago, that said, May 1983, the worst month in the history of Pittsburgh, 25% unemployment. I was like, "Oh, that's the month of my prom." We all went to school outside of Pittsburgh. After four years, we've never had a job interview in Pittsburgh. We never thought that was possible. It didn't happen. Over job interviews, were in other cities. We had to leave here. We were part of the great exodus. There are different components of that great exodus.

[00:07:55] RT: Pittsburgh, if I hear what you're saying, Pittsburgh lost a certain cohort of people who had become college educated, due to the economic conditions in the closing of the steel industry. They never returned, or didn't return for a long time.

[00:08:11] MS: That's absolutely the fact. You said it factually correct. It was cataclysmic in the communities, where a quarter million people left the metro region. Mostly along the Monongahela steel valley, steel region. Those towns have never recovered. We never thought – I mean, it was not within my dream to ever come back to Pittsburgh. That was a certain challenge in college, too. Well, what are we here for and what's going on around us? Part of this reconciliation for me, if we get back to my path is I was thinking, "Well, how do I reconcile these things?"

I threw myself into activism, and studying the lessons of Martin Luther King and the US Civil Rights Movement in the 60s. Because I grew up thinking, that's what we were trying to implement and everything was an uptrend.

[00:08:55] RT: Hang on a second. Let's get specific about, when you say you threw yourself into activism. What did you actually do to be active?

[00:09:02] MS: Two things. Number one, we had the South Africa Sanctions Movement during the last throes of apartheid. This is the middle-80s There was a movement to get colleges to divest from stocks of Coca-Cola and other folks that were invested in South African. In our campus were people from South Africa who helped us through that. I plunged really into a deep study of Martin Luther King and the methods of the civil rights movement. That was both in class and out of class.

There was a deep intellectual component, and I can't short sell it enough. I can't downplay it enough really, that this was to reconcile the wonderful community upbringing I had, my father serving everybody. The racism challenges that US, and our city, and our neighborhoods, and our community in our church face. For example, somebody getting stabbed with an icepick while she held her baby, simply because of the color of her skin. People in our neighborhood didn't want her in.

Most of the parish priest is trying to downplay that. This is a loving community. One priest saying, “Let's take up the challenge.” We had all these challenges. For me to reconcile those two, I put my faith in the civil rights movement. As a matter of faith, I want to say faith intentionally, but I would go a step deeper. I would say that the people who decide later to jump in the swamp, almost always have some ethical basis. Ethical. It's faith, or philosophy, or something deep inside that they're committed to.

I would suggest that if you don't have that, when you jump in, you'll eventually run out of gas, or fail, or show to be flawed. Of course, we have all those examples of people who jump in, but can’t deliver it.

[00:10:39] RT: Yeah. Let's talk about Mike then. What was the construct of that stuff that you just described, that you woven, or pulled from yourself, or added to yourself? Because this is a trajectory-changing moment for you in some ways.

[00:10:54] MS: It was. I think, the summary line, which I should explain, that the summary line is probably, love your neighbor as yourself. I was trying to reconcile those things. Not in a dogmatic fashion. This is a confessional on your podcast. Because I realized about a year ago, I don't talk about my deep faith, and my upbringing as part of why I'm a change agent. I just leave it aside.

One reason for that was the Yugoslav Wars, for example, I was entering a place where two different Christian denominations were trying to beleaguer a Muslim nation. I didn't want to have any religious flags, or banners on me. I didn't want people to be able to identify. I had this agnostic moment, where I never went into a church, except as a tourist. When my son was about six monthsold, and I was walking for exercise with him, and it started a downpour. I walked into the 16th century mosque in downtown Belgrade, one of three remaining monuments of the Ottoman era. I got into the dry and I had my shoes off, and I washed my hands and my feet.

I said to myself and my son in his stroller, “Oh, this is the first house of worship you've been in.” I've had a long period where I didn't acknowledge these influences, the same with political. I worked with guys on human rights in Cuba. One guy said to me, “Mike, I've been working here

for five years. I never figured out even what political party you belong to, or interested in." Just in a period of holding back, and now I'm revealing to you on episode one.

[00:12:26] RT: You're also doing a great job of teasing the listener with the journey you've taken geographically. Not just politically and in the work you're doing. Let's take us out of Penn State. You graduate. I know you dabbled in a few things before you found your way, at least from a photographic standpoint, and those kinds of things. Move us forward about what's going on, now you're on your own, you've done your college education, you're "an adult," you're out in the world, you're starting to have to own your own responsibility for your thinking and your actions and find a direction. What's that journey like at that point?

[00:13:00] MS: Oh, what a good question. There are two sides of it. There's the scientific and engineering side, which goes with career, and then the humanistic side. I have to start with engineering. They said, "What do you want to study?" I said, "Give me the hardest major, because I want to be the best." "All right, engineering. What kind of engineering?" I said, "Well, which one is the hardest? I would like the hardest, because I want to be the best."

I had this competitive vein, where I said, I grew up fourth of nine children. I'm not going to be poor, like my dad was, or struggle. I'm just going to do the best I can. Apparently, I had some talent in that or whatever, because I did very well in engineering. I started my engineering career. That brought me to different cities, New York, Atlanta. In Richmond, I did very well leading a business for a really good industrial company, where I had a territory and I won some prizes for best sales.

I went into every factory from M&Ms to Tylenol to Ford F-150 trucks, and I just absolutely adored it. I learned every day. I worked with presidents, to pipe fitters. I got some broad experience there for a few years. Then after a while, I realized, all right, if I keep doing well, I can make more money. If I do well, I could make more money. It is still early to mid-20s guy, I thought, "Well, isn't there more to life than that?" I felt a pulll for service. Then I thought, "If not now, when?"

I left that prosperous, excellent career with a great company. I still say we when I talk about the company, Graco out of Minneapolis. I have friends from there, even if they've retired. I decided, the service component should be something like, Peace Corps. I had applied to Peace Corps.

[00:14:34] RT: Hold on. Take us through the diagnostic of this. You're working for Graco, you're doing well, you're making money, you're having success. You're leveraging your education. You're hitting all the marks on the things you said you want to do in your college. How does Peace Corps enter into the equation?

[00:14:49] MS: It's so hard. In college, we had some folding tables with Peace Corps on it, a little banner. I looked at it and I thought, “Oh, my God. If I didn't have student loans, I might apply,” or something like that. I thought, I really do want to apply. About a year into my career, I said, “Let me apply now and see what happens.” Peace Corps offered me Kenya. I said, “Well, that's great.” I hope this level of detail is okay. I still have my student loans. I have to pay them off. I put my last year on my Discover card, for goodness sakes, to pay tuition, because I ran out of the Student Aid. I've got to pay my debts first.

Peace Corps said something like, “Well, if you decline, you'll probably not get accepted again.” I had to write a long letter explaining really, I mean it. I'm determined to get out of this hole. I mean, my mom still tells me, “We came to your house, we took turns having breakfast.” I said, “Why did you do that?” She said, “Well, you had one bowl and one spoon, and a card table, instead of a kitchen table.” I had a bed, I didn't have anything else. I didn't have a TV.

I mean, literally, I got myself out of debt within a couple years. I reapplied again. When I was accepted, and I said, “All right, it was a hard decision, because I didn't want to let anybody down.” That's my family. I had grandparents and my dad saying, we spent a 100 years trying to get out of the mire. Here, you're going to go for a volunteer job. Are you out of your mind?

Also, my colleagues who I adored. There was the annual sales meeting. I won twoprizes. I still have these kinds of trophy things for best sales, or whatever. My boss, the regional managers, “And Mike's leaving next week for the Peace Corps.” That was hard to do. I have to say that what I learned at that point was, when you have a hard decision to make, if you make the one that's really right for you, it's so clarifying. It's so freeing. I remember getting to Africa and

saying, “Aha, look what happens when you do, what you think you should do.” That's been a guiding post through the rest of my career is try to do this.

I succeeded for 15 or more years before I had to make a living, let's say, and I haven't always followed it. For a long time I followed, ‘do what you think you should do’, and that has made all the difference. This is Robert Frost, Path Less Traveled. We’re talking to people now in the public, they'll have their own example. I encourage people to hold on to that example, and think of it. That's made the difference for me.

[00:17:12] RT: Now, we got you in Kenya. What's the work in Kenya? What do you learn about – and let's sharpen the focus a little bit here around leading and mobilizing, because I think we can talk a little bit with the same language here that you go to Kenya with, I'm going to suspect, not as much authority as ideally you would like to have, but you have this sense that you could do something. What's the work you do there? How do you get after it and have the impact that you're aspiring to?

[00:17:39] MS: What a question. I hope, I can take it on. I'll start with a slight shift of frame. I rejected Peace Corp’s offer to go to Kenya. Then a year and a half later, I accepted one to Swaziland. I actually went to Swaziland. Now, I never thought I could live in Africa, indoor Africa, understand Africa. I was hoping, I would go somewhere that might be a little similar. I was totally afraid of being so out of context. It took me a while to relax with okay, I can learn. I can understand here.

That's one of the first lessons I think of leading and plunging, jumping in. I didn't understand it. I was afraid. I studied the language. I studied so hard that I gave the speech for swearing anything. I loved the language so much that after six months, I moved into the community, from the teacher housing. The teachers from a number of countries in Africa, our language was English. I was going to lose the community feel. I was curious. Let me move in with a local family.

I had to fight the Peace Corps bureaucracy. They didn't want me to do that for a number of reasons, but we got through it all. I moved in. I was there for speaking siSwati when I woke up in the morning. The last thing I said at night was [inaudible 00:18:48]. Good night, everybody.

Before I went to sleep. I really became immersed. I think for me, that's part of leading. I'm not sure that people always grasp that there is a need for deep, deep, deep knowledge and deep command of what's really happening at a community level.

I can mention a couple of things that might help people there. I even think for the CEO of a company. You have factories, go into the factories and see how it really works, because factories are changing in amazing speed. The quality is higher. Workers are more motivated. Things are safer than they used to be. If you have a conglomerate, and you don't know that and you're just playing at the top level with financial tools. That's a weakness. Plunge down. People respect the leader who plunges in.

Back in the Graco days, it was the guy would stick his arm into a barrel of oil and fuel around in there, or something like that. It really was about working from presidents to pipe fitters. I took that lesson to Africa and I really plunged in. In every subsequent leadership opportunity, there's been a lot of find out what's going on. I mean, I've gone to countries that have been in turmoil and chaos, and I don't just say, I'm going to do good here. I want to help. It's really about the analysis of one time, I went to an African country that I knew, but I hadn't been in a while, and it was coming from Europe.

I took a binder this thick. I'm showing Rick a telephone book thickness right now, of all the news from the last six months. Now on the way down, I read every bit of news for the last six months. When I hit the ground, and I had to go a little cold undercover, but I had to visit as a tourist, because I wouldn't be welcomed as a worker. I could at least talk to people and they saw, “He's with us. He gets it. He's up to date. He cares.” You deliver all those messages. I learned all of that in Swaziland. I learned all that in Swaziland.

I'll say one more tool. I always said, I had X-ray glasses on for whatever was happening around me. Why is that? In a small community, everybody knows everything, and everybody and everything about you. I couldn't walk outside of my house, which was 10 feet by 14 feet, without somebody, a 100 yards down the road saying, “Good morning, teacher,” or something. There was this 360 all about you.

[00:21:02] RT: If I follow what you're saying here, you're talking about an immersion into language and culture, and what's going on on the ground. I'm inclined to want to put that sitting on top of something deeper, which is some deep commitment to something. I'm curious about what's the commitment underneath all of that? Because I think we're going to find out that that commitment shows up in other roles that you had after you left Swaziland. Name that a little bit for people who are listening. What's the operating system that Mike's got going on here that's driving that?

[00:21:34] MS: All right. Good one. I think, the commitment is caring about people. That's the base. That comes from a deep place. I mentioned it earlier. It comes from a really deep place. You can't fake it. If you're a university president, you want to know the students where they came from. You don't look at them as how much they paid for their tuition this year. Whatever leadership role you're in, that curiosity plumbs deeper. I think, it comes from an ethical commitment first.

Now, you can have the ethical commitment, but decide – but not switch on the action. You can say in my heart, "I have this, but I don't have the self-confidence to go forward to try it." There's an ethical part. There's an action decision part. Then once an action decision part is made, it's an experiential thing where you get it over and over and over. You have different permutations of it, where you say, "Okay, I've learned this. Now I can intervene in a different way there." For me, I had a deep curiosity and deep respect for people.

[00:22:27] RT: Can I nudge you forward a little bit? I want to send you up into Europe, if you will. I'm also interested in at some point here, having you talk a little bit about courage and grit. Because I know that this journey that takes you into what is the former Yugoslavia, called on resources and reserves that you probably were uncertain you had at some point. That's a very leading prompt here, and I apologize for that, sort of. Tell us what came next, and what was going on, and what you were called on? How you had to use yourself to get that work done? Because it's different in Swaziland.

[00:23:03] MS: It is. It is. I would like to answer the question. I appreciate it, you're prompting me to really work hard here. I love it. I would suggest that there was a bridge from Africa to Europe in two ways. First of all, I thought that the image that Africa had in the West was

different than the reality I experienced. I founded what now would be called a social entrepreneurship company about 18 years ago, to share lessons of Africa in the United States. That was a company and I had a 100 projects and lectures. I used photography as a medium. I tended to use daily life and ceremonies in photography in that work. That just opened another chapter. That led to Europe in this certain way.

I was on some National Geographic projects. All this stuff, it was the era of film. My cameras were getting dusty and the winding button broken, and I used a nub to wind it up this imperfect Minolta. I had to go to Canon and Nikon later. It chows all of your money. I was open to taking some short assignments. I helped startup Peace Corps South Africa, which was a historic new country opening, the biggest opening since China for Peace Corps.

I would take any job that fed my photography habit. I just love that. That photography, I could talk about it forever. Let's just put it this way, then I needed to feed that habit. I went to Bosnia on an election management project. They're another US organization summit, where I could come to Serbia. I thought of this is just temporary.

I was invited for two weeks. I said, yeah, but I've been through the end of the Civil War in Mozambique. I've been through the end of apartheid in South Africa. I've lived the community level in Swaziland. I learned local languages. Don't you need more for me? That International organization for elections in Bosnia said, "Okay, come for two months, and you'll welcome the two-weekers." It just kept growing and growing and growing.

By the end of that, an American organization saw my work and said, "Come to work for us in Serbia. We think you'd be good at organizing this work." This is now 23 years ago. I was really the only American doing that work in Serbia. There was no ambassador. There was no chargés d'affaires. There was three people at the embassy. We were out there.

It was one of these things, where you just have to dip in yourself and reach deep and say, "What's going on here?" I don't know if I'm answering this well, Rick, but this part of the bridge to Africa is when I went to Africa, I had been to my grandmother's village in Yugoslavia. I saw very stout women getting up at 5 am, in the dark to make breakfast, wearing a babushka. I saw the same thing in Africa. In Africa, I felt at home. Everything was the same, except the melanin,

in a way, from my village that my grandparents came from, and my grandmother. I even met women in Africa several times, I said, “Oh, my God. You remind me of my grandmother so much.” I miss her very much. I felt very at home in the Balkans, and in Africa. That was a bridge.

[00:26:00] RT: Before you dig into that, not everybody here is going to remember what the state of the world was in the Balkans and in Serbia 23 years ago. Can you bring them up to speed on what you walked into as an environment at that time?

[00:26:16] MS: Okay, several milestones where I got there 11 months after NATO forces arrived in Bosnia to help employ the peace agreement. I worked on the electoral part of that. The country had been sundered into three parts. The peace agreement, the authors themselves, Richard Holbrooke admitted, “We stopped the war. We didn't start a peace.” It was dicey. There were three or four crises in the Serbian part of the country that I was in. I was given the responsibility for the capital of the Serbian part of Bosnia, which is the largest city and then the few towns around it. I had a deep responsibility in the elections, while these crises were playing out.

I managed to show my photographs at the National Gallery there in Banja Luka in Bosnia. It was the first foreign artist to have an exhibit. I did that. This is exercising leadership without authority, perhaps. I put making peace in lands of ethnic and cultural conflict. I use the US and Africa, the end of apartheid in South Africa, racial strife in the US and peacemaking, so as to not also – you can show, Bosnia is like, “We're not looking down on you,” which a lot of people felt Americans and other Europeans were. You come from Africa they said, oh, my God. People who know what's going on in Africa come to Europe, and they think they can help us.

They look down on Africa, so they thought we were looking down on them by coming from Africa. This helped alleviate those things. That exhibit was packed. The museum was packed, because there was nothing else to do, shortly after a war. Now in Serbia then, a year later, it's how many months after – it's six, seven months after the largest protests ever, that almost just launched Milosevic, in which the Serbs felt the international community had abandoned them when they were out there for a 100 days straight in winter, protesting. The Americans said that Milosevic was the guarantor of peace.

My program that I started there, a 180 of the first USA grants ever to happen in Serbia was the US makeup, or apology, in a way, for having screwed that up so many months before. I mean, Milosevic lost all the cities, and then that, the citizens ensured finally that they broke through. But him surviving, that was due to the Americans, in their view.

[00:28:28] RT: Is this an accurate characterization of that moment that there's Milosevic, and then there's Mike Staresinic representing the United States as a response to the condition?

[00:28:39] MS: There was stark affair in the country at that moment. A year later, there wasn't, because all the NATO countries went to war with Serbia. They all left. Their diplomatic posts were all abandoned, and I was the only American there. Even before that point, I was one of the few. One of the few.

[00:28:54] RT: Let's put an emphasis on this concept that you're familiar with, which is managing the heat of a change process. Also, the risks that a leader runs in potentially getting hurt themselves in dealing with that what you and I might call – I mean, you're deep in the swamp at this point. Talk a little bit about how you managed yourself, how you managed the heat, how you kept things moving, and at the risk of being hurt.

[00:29:22] MS: I mean, it's a really good question. I want to preface it just by tying it to the previous point that there were almost no Americans there. There could not be a USAID mission director, for example. All the USAID had worked in the country. Why? You need a safe office with bulletproof glass and all this stuff. They cannot send somebody. I was a contractor, NGO down the line. I was fodder, if you wish. If they lost me, it would make the papers, that it wouldn't upend the peace agreement or something.

The heat was real. It was really there. The chargés d'affaires, now this is somebody who have in the absence of a proper ambassador, his partner had an office above mine working on migration issues, and they were doing amazing work. It's a UN organization called IOM. She was protected by the UN and all this stuff. We're in the same building. When she left work one day, she got hijacked, and somebody stole her Mercedes Benz and dumped her on the side of the road a few miles away. Thank goodness, they did that, we didn't know what would happen.

I mean, it was just a chaotic moment where some dictators, they have everything under control, that's of their interest. Everything else, including crime and organized crime is out of their control. Once again, the heat, the risk and the hurt, is you have to do deep, deep, deep analysis. We learn very fast. Action happens very fast. Things happen very fast. You have to be fast. It's like, everything you've learned for any job, but imagine you have to do it immediately all the time. There's almost never a time off. There were monthly assassinations of government, or opposition officials.

As soon as that happened, we had to jump together and say, “What's going on right now? What does that mean?” Again, the question of knowledge and context and plunging in. Sometimes I feel like, when people talk about adaptive leadership, concepts are great, but it's like, well, you don't have to be a subject matter expert. Leave that to somebody else. I don't actually agree with that. You can be safer and reduce the heat, and reduce the risk, the more you know what's going on.

Having said that, you can't eliminate the risk. You do risk hurt all the time. You just hope that – There's a lot of hoping going on. You can ever guarantee. There's a great deal of uncertainty. Another framework of that is very much of you grappling with uncertainty, getting used to ambiguity. You can't solve ambiguity. You have to understand it. You can't solve paradox. You have to try to elaborate it. The two things that are contradictory may exist at once. That came from practice, not from academic model.

[00:31:47] RT: Okay, that's where I want to go. I want you to tease that out for people. What do now about how to live with ambiguity, how to thrive inside ambiguity? Because we live in a world where we have low tolerance for that. We like certainty, we like safety, we like predictability. You've come from a different place, where you've actually had to live every day in that space. What's the craft, the skill, the knowledge you have that supports you and sustains you in that prolonged ambiguity?

[00:32:14] MS: That's a great question. I hope I can answer it adequately. Number one, there is no such thing as control. There is only influence. There's no control, there's only influence. Well, if you're lucky, there might be influence, but there might also not be influence. Being

comfortable with ambiguity says, I don't really have control over what's happening here, or fate, or my own fate, or my organization, or how we do things. It's navigating point-to-point. Also, this may be hard to comprehend. For example, there was in the year 2000, when there was the final 10-month uprising against Milosevic that ultimately broke through, every month, there was an assassination.

His defense minister, his number one mafia warlord who had eluded Bosnia. Just month-by-month, unexpected assassinations, mostly on the regime side. Also, on the opposition side. The leading newspaper editor was gunned down on Easter, coming back from Easter lunch of all things, which was sacrilege for that country. Opposition political leaders, he was shot through the ear, and maybe the other ear, because the guy sprayed the room.

When he survived, people said, "Aha, he survived. They weren't really trying to kill him." The guy thought, "I sat in my living room when the bullets came through the window. I'm lucky to be here. What are you talking about?" For each of these major incidents, we had to stop and reassess what's going on the moment. Several times, I had to leave the country and come back. Several times, I had to leave the country, wondering when I hit the border, could I come back? Several times I came back, and the next country's government wasn't sure to give me a visa. Several times they gave me the visa. I came to the border and they stopped me.

One time, that was on a bus with a 100 people waiting. They interrogated me for two hours in a backroom, which meant not the border officials, but the state security officials. One time that guy looked at my passport and read my name, and said – he read my name. He said, "Joseph, why are you coming to our country?" I had to deal with the police, with the secret police, with God knows what. People typing with two fingers, the policeman with two fingers. He lost his index finger, so he couldn't even type with two index, he went to the second finger.

You come into all these incompetence. Is it incompetence or mendacity? At some point, you accept the risk of hurt if you want to do what you're there for. I think, you can do it properly, or improperly. Properly is you measure the risk. Keep yourself safe. Don't talk too much. I used to go to meetings and walk down the street and look in the glass of the shops to see who was behind me. You never have a meeting inside somebody's office, because you might be

recorded. You go out in the street, where it's the noisy cafes and you have to watch around you who's watching you there.

It was just constant vigilance, which I think, that was properly done, by the way, but it wears people down. You're only human. We only have so much capacity. I think, the second element that I promised to describe is going too far, maybe. I mean, I realized I'm good at this, and I'm unique. Not many people can do it. This is my mission. I should be here. That's appropriate risk. What happens if you think, but I'm specially appointed. I'm heroic. I'm tougher than other people. I have stronger inner reserves. I'm physically able to resist. I had to run away several times. I was a good runner. What if you overestimate yourself, and you put yourself in abject risk?

In my case, after surviving some of these things, I thought, immortal. I had the immortal type thing, and I just realized – I also realized, I wanted to go and serve people, and I was willing to risk it. Could you do so without putting yourself in mortal harm? Since then, I've learned to advise other people who've put themselves at risk. For example, always run to help people who need help, because the criminals are more afraid than you are. That's one.

If you're the person being targeted, you get out of the situation. I've worked with opposition leaders who heard gunfire, and walk towards. Now, if you're the target of the gunfire, don't walk towards it. Get out. You have to be willing to give your life, but ready to live another day. You should aim to survive. You have the bravery to give your life, but you're not trying to give your life. These fine angles. They were opposition leaders in African countries, and Arab and Indian subcontinent countries. In Southeast Asia, who I said, the principle is to be ready to give your life, but to try not to. You talk through with them. How do you actually do that?

[00:36:46] RT: I want to bring you back to your hometown, because I know you've returned, and you return for specific reasons. Talk a little bit about how you export this knowledge and these experiences in places in Africa and in Bosnia, into a place like Pittsburgh? What's transferable? What did you have to leave behind, because it didn't fit, couldn't help? What did you have to add to your repertoire in order to be able to do work back in the states?

[00:37:15] MS: Such a good question. I feel like, I should drop the concluding line first, so that people see where I'm going. It's very hard for people who think they're superior and everything to learn from somebody else. It's a challenge to come back to the US with lessons from abroad, for people who don't want to hear about it or learn about it. If you say I worked in Africa, they'd immediately dismiss the example sometimes. It's a bit tragic, but there are ways around it.

I brought some of our Oxford and say, TCL colleagues to Pittsburgh to see what Pittsburghers could learn from them. One of our classmates shared experiences on reducing youth gun violence. They resulted in programs. Another came to see how more Asian students might come to the US. I tried to prove through these exchanges, and I hope to welcome you here one day, that Americans can learn from others. To me, that's a huge conclusion. Americans can learn from others. We're always exporting our ideas.

We bring people here on exchange programs, and hundreds of people on exchange programs to the US, so they can learn from us. We have to flip that a little bit. For example, working almost 20 years overseas, I frequently assumed that we were bringing the best American examples to help other folks. The reality I found out was flipped. When I came back to the US, we had done so many things overseas that people had not tried here, and were clueless about it. It's about gender equality. It's about environmental activism in the parks. It's about electoral freedom and voter registration. It's about peaceful protests. It's organized, with non-violent discipline.

In almost every category, we can find out that for whatever reason, these programs, a lot of which were American, US taxpayer money, and also US foundation money, like the Mott and the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation. We were trying things – it hadn't really been tried here. In 2004, I with two other private foundations organized the first examination of what's going on with radicalization through certain conservative mosques to generate terrorism. That's now called countering violent extremism. I think, the term was coined in 2011. The programs are now really effective for the US, but we were doing it in 2004.

There's a lot of pioneering stuff going on overseas. I would encourage Americans to open their minds. I've had a hard time making the transition, I have to say. I haven't found people ready to

learn, or apply, or do the hard work. I find Americans a little bit off the pace, if that's the right word. Can I give an example? Last summer 2020, I thought the George Floyd protests were off to a great start, as they do in much of the world. You have a spontaneous organizer. People pour their hearts out. They mean it. Everybody takes notice. This is common in the world.

Now, after spontaneous organizing, comes organizing spontaneity, where you have to say, “Well, wait. If we're going to be out here longer than 10, or 15 or 30 days, how do we do it differently?” You have to have leadership, non-violent discipline, unity, the strategic planning. Those four things I offered to you as movements for George Floyd. I went to marches myself. I participated. I called political and civil rights leaders, and I didn't find to take up here.

Not to blame the movements, but when violence happens, their opponents can seize on it. That's why we teach non-violent discipline to the movement. If your opponents, what's the word? They insert themselves and make violence to make you look bad, you take responsibility for that, and keep them out. People didn't want to take on that hard work. Therefore, they lost some momentum.

I mean, George Floyd and a 1,000 other people got murdered last year, and all we got was a few statues coming down, and one cop went to prison. Now, that's very pointed, and he didn't probably converse what I said. Let me explain it, just with one sentence. The fact is that I don't criticize movements from the outside. What I try to do, as I told you, if I could meet movement leaders from the inside, these are the kinds of things we would go through.

Now, one of the other translational things to come back to the states and people, “Yeah, but you’re a white guy. This is for us now.” Find, be that as it may. I face that in every single movement that I've worked with. The question becomes, “How can my experiences in my perspectives of my caring, and my willingness to put my own body on the line, be translated to people who are much different than me. I'm not part of their group. Whether it's Burma, Cuba, North Korea, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, Ukraine. I can go on for 40 different countries. There's a method of saying, or way of saying, “Look, I respect your movement so much, that I'm willing to put myself on the line. I'm willing to risk myself.”

That usually generates the respect. I think, the dynamics in America at the moment, are that I haven't been so effective as I might otherwise could be. I have had those phone calls where I've reached out to leaders and said, “Do you have time to talk about this? I'd like to hear your interest.” I still say now, I'll say it on your podcast, if you wish. I have one hour every day to talk to anybody who wants to talk about this stuff, strategically.

If you're committed to non-violent action, if you're committed to social change, I'll give you my number. I want to hear about your organization. You tell me what you're doing, what your needs are. I'll reflect on it through my experiences. Maybe that's getting a little bit of gray beard over here that I'm in a position to just help out whenever I can.

[00:42:39] RT: Yeah. I think you've earned the right to make that request and make that offer. Okay, so in the time we have left, a couple of specific questions. One is, I want you to talk about, again, accounting for the possibility that there's people out there listening, who are thinking about raising their hand and choosing to lead and something, like you did many years ago. Talk a little bit about your leadership failures, things that – because my argument is, I think you would agree with this, that we learn more from those failures than we do from our successes. What's one or two key things that you could pass on to people who were thinking about traveling this road, that they could learn from without having to make the same mistake?

[00:43:15] MS: Okay. Can you ask the second question? Because the first one is deep, and I want to think and which one do I answer is?

[00:43:22] RT: What did you learn from your leadership failures?

[00:43:25] MS: All right, that was repeating the first question. I meant you'd ask the second one, as I'm struggling with that. Let me try to answer it then. Leadership as much as it is personal and about decisions of action or not taking action. There's so much room for error there. So much room. Over-estimating yourself, underestimating your opponent. This is said to be one of the classic model. It comes from Clausewitz, or Sun Tzu, or just political conflict and competition. Never overestimate yourself, and never underestimate your opponent.

Now, in the absence of information, which it's an adaptive leadership task, when we don't know what the hell is going on, actually. We have to act anyway. This is a daunting task, and we can always make grievous errors there. I felt like a fool when I was kidnapped, for example. I was kidnapped and tortured by secret services on the last day of the Serbian revolution. One of the cops told me, “You might be the last victim of communism in Yugoslavia.” I thought, they meant to kill me. Also, when they took me to the border and asked me to walk across a no man's land in the dark for about a mile and a half, I thought they would shoot me in the back and leave me in a ditch.

Don't overestimate yourself, or underestimate your opponent. Having said that, there's a lot of room to get away with a lot. In the meantime, because I find, I intervened in a criminal thing this weekend. One of the lessons is, the crooks are more scared than you are, because they know they're doing wrong and you know you're doing right. That's an advantage. There's a lot of room to be assertive and just do stuff that people aren't expecting there. When I was kidnapped and tortured, the secret services were trying to find out if I'd served in the US armed forces. Now, I never did and I'm not a spy. I didn't know what they're driving at at first.

I think, if they could prove I was in the army or something, then they could accuse me of being a spy. I later learned that the US takes its spies from its armed forces, all these Delta forces, these amazing people. I didn't know that at the time. I was just an NGO worker. It took me a while to figure out. Trust yourself and believe yourself. I think, that's another one. After I was severely mistreated, I was allowed to come back to myself, put my glasses on, dress again. One of the people said, “You know me?” That's a title of book eventually, You Know Me. I think, when did I know this guy from? Where did I know him from?

That was one of his sticks was intimidate me with that. We had met six months earlier, because he was one of the policeman who had to interview me. I said, “Oh, you must be Igor.” I couldn't even see him, because I didn't have my glasses. “You sound like Igor. I think, we met here in the same building.” Was it May 5th, 2000? Almost exactly six months earlier. I was trying to bullshit him a little bit with my answer.

When it got into the long interrogations then, which were done in a more orderly, you're being arrested room, with all the recordings, and all the good cop, bad cop, and people coming in

and out, and the psychologist was very nice to me. A female being nice to me. I was mean to the nice cop, and I was nice to the mean, cop. I tried to mess them up. I have to say this, I decided, okay, do your breathing meditation. You've been working on for years, just count from 10 over and over. I enjoyed about eight hours of interrogation. I was looking straight ahead. I just had to just focus on a coffee cup on this guy's desk, as they came in and out.

Finally, they all left and gave me a break. I said, “Okay, let me take a break from all this breathing, and all this focus on one coffee cup.” After eight hours, I looked right next to the coffee cup, and what did I see? They had a gun pointing at me the whole time. I think, from their point of view, I was probably looking down the barrel of a gun, and responding very calmly. That made me laugh like Buddha. I guess, I mean, I'm saying a lot of things in one. I think that people have a lot of – whether it's Buddhist breathing, or laughing, or having your own sense of humor, or plunging in deep with data and knowing what's going on, and accepting ambiguity.

I mean, we've just laid out about 20 models. The thing about this diverse Pittsburgh upbringing, and all the other things that we've talked about is you literally get thousands of models you're offered. Our leadership teachers back at Oxford would say, “I Googled leadership, and I got a million hits.” That's because every situation is different. I think, we all have in us as leaders, as potential leaders, as people who want to jump into the swamp, as people who would dare to lead, we have 10, 20, 50, a 100 different things that we can rely on when we decide to do that.

I don't want to say it to pollyanna-ishly, but if people face a decision, “Do jump in and lead or not?” Among the brand committee. I wasn't supposed to mention at that meeting that our marketing is not relevant to today's kids, because my daughter told me so. Everything. Just jump in and see where it goes.

[00:48:11] RT: Hey, I want to immensely thank you for taking us on this journey. I learned more things than I thought I was going to learn, and I thought I knew a lot. I truly appreciate the time you spent with us, wading into the swamp, telling us your stories. Why don't you, before we get out of here, just do you have a website, or anything you want to put forward for people to know where you are?

[00:48:33] MS: Let me think about that for a moment. I'm using a different social media, about 10,000 social media followers, and various forms. I think, the best one might be Twitter for our audience. It's @MikeStaresinic, or is it @MikeStar33? I don't even know my address. @MikeStaresinic on Twitter.

[00:48:50] RT: Spell your last name for the listeners.

[00:48:52] MS: Yes. Everybody have a pen, It's 10 letters that don't go together. I'm the anti-scrabble guy. Mike Staresinic. S-T-A-R-E-S-I-N-I-C. Was that hard?

[00:49:09] RT: With that, ladies and gentlemen, we'll let you go. Thank you, Michael.

[00:49:12] MS: Thank you, Rick. God bless. Have a great day.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:49:16] ANNOUNCER: Thank you for listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders with Rick Torseth. Please take this moment and hit subscribe, to follow more leadership swamp conversations.

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