

ARTICLE

To love is to act: Victor Hugo and Healthcare

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What is the difference between justice and being just?

When *Les Misérables* opened at Washington DC's Kennedy Center this month, the irony of presenting this grand story of compassion in the face of power was lost on very few.

As it presents the protagonist Valjean's "just acts" of compassion and love in contrast to Javert, the antagonist's pursuit of "justice," as defined by the royals holding power, it is hard to not draw parallels to our current time and place.

No less a dramatic question is being asked of every healthcare leader today, too.

What does it mean for us to act justly today? Who receives the care we offer? How is it delivered? Can science itself be trusted?

In a landscape where the essence of what it means to provide care is being questioned and redefined by the very institutions endowed to promote and foster it, we healthcare leaders are left with the work of forging a path that remains ever just.

We bear this charge in a tumultuous environment. The big beautiful bill (that few still seem to have read) moving its way through Congress' lower intestine has ramifications for healthcare that are difficult to calculate and will remain uncertain long after its passage.

In such turbulent times, it's natural to instinctively retract. To go into a holding pattern. To wait things out.

But when is discretion no longer the better part of valor?

Leadership is ultimately defined by action (even when that action, sometimes, is to hold the line or to not take that bait).

Action is what leaders do, and especially so when the way forward isn't clear. It's this wayfinding that elevates leaders, separates those who move forward in a storm from those who are victims of the weather. And today, for leaders, the greatest risk is inaction, to be paralyzed by the whirlwind.

Les Misérables tells a bold story. One of courageously taking just action at a time where "being just" and "justice" are not entirely aligned. It is also a story of the power of love and what it drives us to do. This was an overarching theme that ran through Victor Hugo's work—one that was distilled to its very essence by the author just days before his death.

"*Aimer, c'est agir*," he wrote. "To love is to act."

But how does one act now? How does one lead confidently—and justly—through this time of boiling change? Consider these steps:

Powerfully rearticulate your purpose. Why do you do what you do? What are your first principles and to what action do they call?

2. Rally your resources around this rejuvenated purpose. This is not your work to bear alone. You have a team—one that hungers to be part of the solution. Engage them.
3. Double down on production and triple down on innovation. The future will require new paths; map them and take them.
4. Make the “no regret” moves that will take you forward and sustain today’s momentum. Do not freeze.
5. Take the risk (and the hits) to do what you believe is right. Some moves will work better than others. Invest wisely. Exploit opportunity and success. Keep moving.

Confident action does not mean pain-free action. We are in a season of hard choices, but it’s always better to act than be acted upon.

Doing so in the face of uncertainty is daunting. Hugo had a thought on that as well.

“The future has several names,” Hugo wrote in *Les Misérables*. “For the weak, it is impossible; for the fainthearted, it is unknown; but for the valiant, it is ideal.”

We now find ourselves writing new bold stories. Stories to guide us through the uncertainty of today but, like *Les Misérables*, are borne out by the test of time.

When you and your organization look back a year from now (or five, or ten), what story do you want to be able to tell? A story of good stewardship, of course, but of courage and creation, too.

Maybe they’ll make a musical about it.

This article is part of Healthcare Remix—a series of leadership articles that connect history and the arts with today’s healthcare challenges and opportunities. [Click here to view all.](#)

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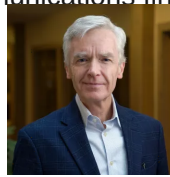
Ken Graboys, CEO of Chartis, began his journey not in an office, but in rural Africa, working in communities facing famine and limited access to care. It was there he saw how the foundations of health—food, medicine, compassion—could shape the trajectory of entire communities. In 2001, he co-founded Chartis with the mission to improve the delivery of healthcare in the world. His career path—from fieldwork in Mauritania to healthcare transformation—illustrates a commitment to cultivating healthier communities through thoughtful, sustainable action.

David Jarrard, Chairman of Jarrard, grew up in Oak Ridge, Tennessee—a town shaped by science and innovation. His early career as a journalist covering human stories gave him firsthand insight into how storytelling can influence public perception and drive change, which naturally connects to healthcare, a field where clear communication can impact patient outcomes and organizational success. This foundation led him to build one of the nation's leading healthcare communications firms.



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