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Making Connections Through Coaching: A Story of Finding Meaning Through Athletics and Coaching

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MAKING CONNECTIONS THROUGH COACHING:
A STORY OF FINDING MEANING THROUGH ATHLETICS AND COACHING

A Thesis Presented

by

Mary Krug

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

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for the Degree of Master of Education
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Abstract

In this thesis, I share stories of my experiences as a high school science teacher, gymnastics coach, and track and field coach and I explore my discovery of the importance of making connections in my vocation. Written in Scholarly Personal Narrative format, I reflect on my own experiences with high school and college athletics I and discuss the lessons that I learned which I find to be most important to coaches and teachers. This thesis centers around making connections with athletes and students as a coach and educator. I dive into my career and highlight the lessons that I find to be most important for myself and other teaching and coaching professionals. The strongest take-away message that I would like my readers to recognize is that teachers who express genuine interest in students' lives can help them open up and feel like they belong. In turn, a cooperative, collaborative community can form.

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Preface

Have you ever taken time to sit down and write about your life? Pick any topic, write until you have found clarity. What would your story be? Have your actions been heroic or villainous? Are your experiences fraught with success or ineptitude? What have you learned from your life's mistakes and successes?

I chose this opportunity. I decided to write about coaching because at this point in my life, being a coach is a large part of my identity. I coach high school gymnastics, high school track and field, specifically pole vault, long jump, and triple jump, and I also work at a gymnastics camp in the summer-time coaching kids of all ages and abilities. When I sat down to write, the first story that came to mind was not about coaching, it was about my experience as an athlete. As I continued to write I relived some of the memorable experiences I had as an athlete and found meaning for myself now, as a coach.

This thesis tells my (Mary Krug's) story about competing in gymnastics and pole vault throughout my childhood, adolescence, and college years. My passion for both sports led me to coaching and teaching high school students. I chose to write about these topics because coaching and teaching have been very important parts of my life. I am proud to be a role model for kids and I care about coaching gymnastics and track as well as teaching science. Throughout this thesis, I invite the reader to be part of my journey as I tell stories of triumph and defeat. I share lessons about trust, compassion, and teamwork and I ask questions about finding purpose and meaning in my work. I share

the wisdom from the great minds of John Wooden, Paul Kalanithi, Nancy Aronie, Anne Lamott and many others.

I believe that making connections with myself, past teammates, coworkers, and past and current athletes makes my participation in sports teams unforgettable. These connections give me the motivation to try my best, be competitive, and attend every practice with purpose. Many people join sports teams to learn how to be competitive and win. The intent of this thesis was not about winning; it was about the journey that every athlete goes through to find success. However, at times, it is more about winning than I care to admit. Perhaps it is the pursuit of victory that is more indelible than the victories themselves. For the athletes, coaches and teachers reading this, my hope is that you can discover the importance of making connections, developing a community, and building trust in your pursuit of victories and success.

Chapter 1. Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) Methodology

A story is always profoundly personal and unique to some degree, never replicated in exactly the same form by anyone else. Your truth may be very different from mine, and vice versa. But if I can hear your truth within the context of your own personal story, I might be better able to find its corollary in my own story.

– Robert Nash¹ (University of Vermont Faculty, Author)

SPN is vigorous writing. It has the ability to touch the fringes of our soul as we unravel the meaning in the hidden crevices of our truths.

– Sydnee Viray² (Coauthor of *How Stories Heal*)

I lack self confidence in my writing. In middle school and high school writing was the most difficult subject for me. I hated practicing all types of writing and I, especially, avoided classes that required creative writing. When I had to write an essay I usually asked my dad for inspiration and I asked my mom to edit my work. At the time I could not imagine trying to write without the help of one of my parents or my teacher. When I went to college I took an English class where I started to consistently get Bs and B-s on my work. I was used to getting As in all of my classes, so I was frustrated that the good grades were not coming easily to me. I put in extra time and asked my teacher for feedback on my drafts and then I would write second and third drafts of my work. I will never forget one conversation I had with her because I walked away feeling eager to be a better writer. At the end of class one day she approached me to give me some encouragement. She told me I needed to practice more writing. She said that I have

¹ Robert J. Nash, and Sydnee Viray, *How Stories Heal: Writing Our Way to Meaning and Wholeness in the Academy*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 34.

² *Ibid.*, 118.

potential, but I needed to put the time into practice. She explained that biologists need to know how to be good writers if they want to write grants, reports, or articles. This was the first time someone was honest with me about my writing and helped me realize that writing is universal no matter what your major is or your future job. I walked away feeling special that a teacher took time to show me she cared about my success and wanted to see me get better. She also helped me realize that I need to know how to write, even though I am not going to become an author, journalist, or English teacher.

I still have low self-esteem when it comes to writing. I never would have thought I could write a thesis paper, and I regularly doubt my writing even as I embark on this thesis journey. Whenever I sit down in one of my Interdisciplinary Studies program classes with Professor Robert Nash, I hope that I do not have to read to the class. I also think to myself, *if I do read, I hope I get to go first so that I do not have to look bad after someone else reads their brilliant heartfelt story*. I feel vulnerable whenever I read my writing because I have no faith that my stories are worth telling. I feel like no one else will find them interesting. I had these insecure thoughts even in my fourth class with Robert after receiving over a dozen reassuring emails from him when I submitted my work.

Writing an SPN thesis is helping me become a more confident writer. It is difficult to write personal stories and it is intimidating and scary to then share them with strangers. Every time I sit down to write, I am taking a step towards conquering my fears. I am proving myself wrong.

Robert Nash, a professor at the University of Vermont (UVM), developed SPN writing. It is a type of personal writing that stands out from autoethnographies, memoirs,

essays, and autobiographies. A piece of SPN writing has a theme or a through-line topic that connects to personal stories from the author's life. The author writes from the inside-out, meaning the stories are personal and from the author's heart, but they also connect to the reader and the greater human existence. The stories are universalizable so that anyone reading the piece of writing can make a connection to the writing. When a writer states something that is universalizable, in a similar circumstance, the reader is given the opportunity to relate with the writer's thoughts or actions. SPN writing also contains "now what" statements which tie the scholarship to the personal narratives. The statements develop the theme of the writing and give the stories a purpose.

A piece of SPN writing is like a floor routine in gymnastics. Each gymnast at a high school gymnastics meet is judged on the same requirements: therefore, every floor routine has a similar set of skills. There are tumbling requirements and dance requirements. I think of these as the scholarly piece in SPN. Each routine is choreographed to different music with unique dance moves. The routines have their own character which I would compare to the personal stories in SPN. Finally, the whole routine tells a story as it is performed and each piece is connected in some way. I think of the whole floor routine as the narrative part of an SPN writing piece. Alone, the scholarly part of SPN is dry and lifeless. If a gymnast were to go out on the floor and show her tumbling passes, jumps, leaps, and pirouettes, it would be boring for the audience to watch the same skills performed over and over by different athletes. The music, dance, and attitude of the gymnast captivates the audience. If a gymnast were to perform a routine that lacked the required skills, the full story would not be present. There would be no way to compare it with the other routines and have it relate

to the sport. If a piece of writing lacks scholarship, then it becomes a journal entry that relates to the reader only. This metaphor for SPN helps explain how a piece of SPN writing is not whole without all three pieces.

I have chosen to write my thesis in the SPN writing format because SPN allows me to share my personal life experiences in sports, teaching, and coaching. This format allows me to connect my stories to larger ideas and lessons. After reading my stories the reader will have a deeper appreciation for the lessons and they will have a better context to understand the ideas that I am presenting. Many wonder where meaning exists in their lives. Some wonder why we are alive on Earth and what will happen to us when we die. We wonder if we have chosen the right profession and if we are living a life that gives us purpose and happiness. Writing this thesis helped me process the meaning in my life and it helped me conquer some of my fears and anxieties around coaching and life in general. I wrote this thesis to witness my life from my perspective and to share it with others.

I find the most meaning in my life when I am making connections with other people. Nash states in his book, *How Stories Heal*, “We’re all more alike than not, even though our individual stories are very different.”³ I believe that human connections sustain us when we are at our highs and our lows. When we are alone, we think about others, when we are sad we want someone to make us feel better, and the love we share with others brings us joy. Nash stated this idea gracefully when he said, “Let’s agree to huddle together with the protective cocoon of our mutual humanity for the comfort and

³ Ibid., 28.

affirmation we need when things go dismally wrong, or for the matter, ecstatically right.”⁴ I live through the connections I have with the people that surround me and their mutual humanity. When I am proud of an accomplishment I share it with the people I care about most. When I am disappointed, I need people like my parents, siblings, closest friends and my partner to share my disappointments with. I also live to share their good and bad moments with them because sometimes listening can be more rewarding than sharing my stories.

I believe that educators strive to evoke personal stories from their students because the best way to remember new information and learn something is to connect ideas to things you already know. “Teachers can enrich students’ minds by telling them things that are already known.”⁵ The important part of learning is that the students take this new information and transform it into something that is meaningful to them. They take the information and connect it to something they already know. This is the basis for the constructive approach to teaching. Constructive theories of knowledge are based around the idea that “existing knowledge is used to build new knowledge.”⁶ Learning is enhanced when the teacher pays attention to the beliefs that students bring to a lesson or learning task. If the teacher uses this knowledge “as a starting point for new instruction,”⁷ then the learner is more apt to understand the new content and remember it. Adding personal stories helps a student’s brain make connections between the subject

⁴ Ibid., 28.

⁵ James E. Zull, *The Art of Changing the Brain: Enriching Teaching by Exploring the Biology of Learning* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2002), 44.

⁶ John D. Bransford, A.L. Brown and R.R. Cocking, *How People Learn Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* (Washington, DC: National Acad. Press, 2004), 11.

⁷ Ibid., 11.

matter and something that the student already understands and remembers. SPN writing is one way to connect scholarship to personal stories. As Nash states, “Without our stories, our lives are without form or content.”⁸ Therefore, I have chosen the SPN methodology for my thesis so I can summarize what I have learned in the past couple years of coaching and teaching with stories, and scholarship. I want to share my stories the way I lived them and I want to dig deep into my heart and write my way into meaning.

⁸ Robert Nash and Sydnee Viray. *How Stories Heal*, 30.

Chapter 2. The Sport

2.1 The State Meet

Mindfulness

By: Mary Krug

I walk into the dark gymnasium
My heart is pounding
I climb the stairs up to the top of the bleachers
My nerves are overwhelming
I sit and breathe
My emotions are pulsing through my head
I visualize each routine
My confidence starts to take over
I look out at the empty gym for the last time and soak in the sight
My heart fills with pride
I look at my teammate sitting next to me and smile at her
I am ready to compete

I wrote the poem above to illustrate how my last high school gymnastics state championship meet started. This is a day that I would go back and relive many times if I could. I was sitting at the top of the gymnasium taking in the whole picture early in the morning before the gymnasium was open to the public. It was my way of being in the moment and preparing myself for the biggest day of the year and of my life at the time. I can go back to this day in my mind and feel the nerves, excitement, frustration, pain, love, pride, and team connection. I had a mission that day. My brain was swarming with doubts, nerves, and pressure to succeed, while my heart was filled with determination to be the first gymnast in the state of Vermont to win four consecutive state all-around titles.

There were setbacks that day that make me appreciate it even more. The competition warm ups did not go as I had planned. Some of my teammates and I changed our bar settings the night before the meet. The uneven bars can be adjusted to fit the size and needs of the gymnast. Another one of our coaches who did not typically coach us was observing our practice and suggested the change. He thought it would be a better setting for our straddle backs. This is a skill on the uneven bars where the gymnast lets go of the high bar and flies backwards over the low bar and catches it in a straddle position. In warm ups for the meet, I hit my big toe on the low bar during my giants because of the bar adjustment. Imagine being in a handstand on the high bar and swinging down to circle around the bar, and then having a wooden rod get in your way. It was painful even though it was only my toe that hit the bar. I tried to tell myself to forget about the pain, but when I finished my bar warm-up I shed some tears of frustration. I talked with my coach and she reassured me that I would be fine and it was a minor setback. While I waited to warm-up on vault, I guided myself over to a booklet of quotes that my coach had made for me. I opened to the page in the booklet that read: *Pain is weakness leaving the body.* I read that quote over and over to myself.

Next we went to warm-up on vault, which was our last event to warm-up before the meet started. I felt the pain in my foot with each step I took as I ran down the vault runway. After my first warm-up vault adrenaline took over. I told myself I could not throw away my dream and all my hard work for a bruised toe. I warmed up my “Tsuk” vaults and did my best to land on my feet. A Tsuk vault, named after Mitsuo Tsukahara (a Japanese gymnast who first performed it), is when the gymnast hits the vaulting table in a handstand and then flips backwards off the table onto her feet. When it was time for

the meet to start, all the teams lined up in the large supply closet in the back of the gym and waited for the march out music to start. However, this time the march out music was not what I expected. My coach made a split-second decision to play one of my favorite songs. "Sweetest Girl" by Wyclef Jean started playing over the loudspeakers. It did not mean anything to the other 70 gymnasts or the couple hundred fans sitting in the bleachers. They did not know the significance of the song. A huge smile came across my face as I walked out onto the competition floor. I looked over at my coach standing next to the stereo and she winked at me. Naïve 17-year-old me did not realize we were playing a song about a stripper, but those details were overlooked.

After we marched out and the teams were introduced, our Essex team got into a huddle. My teammate wished us all good luck and we yelled our cheer to show our excitement for the competition. I have a blurred memory of most of the competition. I remember falling on both of my vaults. I remember going to bars with determination to make up for my poor vaults. I nailed my bar routine perfectly, which was a relief after my terrible warm up and first event. I felt more confident going into the last two events. I do not remember much about the balance beam except for the nerves coursing through my body and my shaking feet and legs doing their best to keep me on the beam. I remember the pauses I took in my routine to take a deep breath. I told myself that it was just another normal beam routine and every breath I inhaled would calm my nerves. I stayed on the beam throughout my routine and dismounted with a sigh of relief as my teammates ran over to hug me - as they always did when I finished a routine. The meet ended with the floor exercise. My teammates and I danced with attitude and

confidence and tumbled with power. We fought for every landing and screamed and cheered for each other until we had no voices left.

The end of the meet was the most emotional part of the day for me. Joe Gonillo, my high school track coach and the announcer for all our gymnastics meets, announced the scores of the state meet. When it came down to the first-place all-around champion he spoke with purpose. He announced, “And first-place in the all-around, for the fourth consecutive year, a first time in Vermont history... Mary Krug.” My eyes welled up with tears at the sound of his voice. He spoke slowly and took a pause in between each phrase to emphasize the significance of what I had done. I walked up to the podium, accepted my ribbon and blue carnation flower, looked at the audience, and I started crying tears of joy. I turned to my teammate who was standing on the second-place podium and gave her a big hug. She had taken 2nd place in the All-Around for the fourth consecutive year. She was also shedding tears. Her tears were a mix of happiness and probably a little disappointment. The awards ceremony ended with the announcement of first and second place teams. Our team won the state title for the fourth year. We had battled with our close rivals Champlain Valley Union High School for four years. We could not have been prouder that our hard work and dedication paid off.

2.2 Team

*Teamwork is the ability to work together toward a common vision. The ability to direct individual accomplishments toward organizational objectives. It is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results.*⁹

- Andrew Carnegie (Business Leader, Entrepreneur, Philanthropist)

I have learned many lessons from my days of competing gymnastics. When I think back on the years of competing in the VT State meet, the moments that stand out to me are the moments when I was connecting with my teammates, coaches, and competitors. The teammate I was sitting with on top of the bleachers before the State meet was my best friend and biggest competition. We both competed for Essex High School and we were the top two gymnasts in the state of Vermont the previous three years. We were both competing against each other for the All-Around title and our team was also fighting for its fourth straight State Championship title. We had almost completed four years of competing with, and against each other, yet we sat on those bleachers looking over the empty gymnasium giving each other positive energy and love. She and I started a new tradition. Our coaches caught onto our mindful practice of sitting in the dark at the top of the bleachers and visualizing our routines. After we graduated, they started bringing the team to the top of the bleachers before every State meet to visualize and mentally prepare for the excitement of the day.

On February 18, 2017, I marched up to the top of the bleachers in the high school gym as an assistant coach with my current team of athletes and our head coach. Over the years, the practice has evolved into more of a team building activity. We visualize for a

⁹ Andrew Carnegie: “Teamwork is the ability to work together toward...”.
<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/251192-teamwork-is-the-ability-to-work-together-toward-a-common>.

couple minutes as a team and we also give the athletes a small gift and give them a motivational talk. Ashley, the head coach at the time, read a poem that she wrote for the athletes.

Today is the day you've been waiting for all year
Today is states day, let's hear you cheer!
There is no denying you have put in the time, effort, and reps
You've prepared physically, mentally, emotionally, all the right steps.
There is nothing left to do at this point except to be a team,
If you all work together you will achieve your dream.
Competitors, go out and give it your absolute best,
Your teammates and coaches are here to support you through the rest.
We could not have asked for a better season,
And each and every one of you are the very reason.

- Ashley Neary (Essex High School Coach)

Thinking back on my own State meet day, I still remember the conversation I had with my coaches when I was hurting and feeling discouraged after my bar warm up. They were as invested in my success and the team's success as I was. Having had these experiences myself, and seeing the leadership and dedication of my two high school gymnastics coaches, I know what it feels like to have a team and your coaches support you. Now as a coach, I have a better understanding of the importance of teaching athletes and what it means to be part of a team. When you are part of a team, you do not compete for the individual accomplishments. You compete for your team, your school, and your community. When you look back in ten years, you still remember the feelings of being with your teammates and coaches and the feeling of being part of something bigger than yourself. Being a part of the Essex High School gymnastics team gave me the experience and wisdom to help me build a team culture of family and unity with my athletes now. I

can teach them how to be good teammates and unselfish athletes. I can let them know that they are building connections and memories that they will look back on for many years to come and cherish.

Our gymnastics team's theme for the 2016-17 season was, "This is how we Role." Everyone on our team contributed to the team's success in her own way. Each athlete had a role that they played for their teammates, whether it was leadership, support, motivation, humor, or encouragement; each athlete was important to the team's overall success. Our athletes who did not get to compete at the state meet still knew they had an important role. They knew that their teammates would not be able to compete their best routines if they did not have the support of everyone on the team. The girls competing knew that they were not just competing for themselves, they were doing their best for the team. One of the ways that we help build the team culture is to feature the gymnasts. We dedicate a practice to each gymnast and at the beginning of practice everyone would go around in a circle and say something positive that they appreciated about their teammate. This builds a team culture of positivity and it also helps each member of the team feel like they belong and that they are valued.

On the week leading up to states, we pair the girls up and assign them a day of that week to come into practice with a motivational activity for the team. This year the girls picked motivational activities related to our theme of team roles. One group came into practice with a puzzle that they made. They gave each of us a puzzle piece. Each puzzle piece has a picture of one of our team members on it. They included the coaches as well. The girls instructed us to look at the teammate's puzzle piece that we received and think about that person's role on the team. We all went around and talked about the

person that we had. Then we put the puzzle together. The girls explained that each piece put together, makes a complete picture. Without a piece, our team is not complete. Another group came into practice with a bag filled with cut out words that describe qualities of a good teammate. For example, some of the words were focused, fun, committed, energized, and involved. They asked their teammates to randomly pick a word from the bag and then explain how they would embody that action or word for the state meet. Then they asked that everyone try to embody all the words, because that will make our team unstoppable. Another group made a poster that said our team, our family. They had each of the girls write a sentence on the poster about what makes our team a family.

It is important to have the athletes buy into the team bonding activities. As coaches, we can only do so much. We can lecture the girls, give them motivational quotes, and tell them stories, but they can choose not to listen. When the motivation comes from them, they are the ones teaching it and embracing the values they are teaching.

On three of our Saturday practices we had “Blue and Gold” days which are our school colors. “Blue and Gold” days are something my coaches came up with even before I was on the team. On a Blue and Gold day, we randomly split the team up into two teams – one blue, one gold. The teams compete against each other in conditioning contests, gymnastics contests, games, skits, and trivia. The girls push themselves more than they do in a normal day of conditioning. They thrive off the team competition. Because they are competing for their team, they push themselves further than they think they can go. This year we had two gymnasts do a ten-minute wall sit because they

refused to lose for their team. On Blue and Gold days we hear genuine laughter and excitement from the girls. When they are making up songs, or skits to perform, or when they are racing to set up the equipment faster than the other team. It does not matter the activity; the girls appreciate the time to have fun with their teammates. Sometimes we have them do ridiculous tasks like carrying a mat from one side of the gym to the other. The girls work as a team to lift and then carry it together faster than the other team. The girls do not argue with us over the results of the competitions, just like they cannot argue with an unfavorable score from a judge. They know that the day is spent pushing themselves and bonding with each other and that is the real goal.

Throughout the season when we write the schedules for practice, we group the girls on events with purpose. Each practice the girls go to three different events, so we set up the schedule for each practice ahead of time. In the beginning of the year we make sure to put upper classmen with underclassmen so they get to know each other and everyone feels included. We group the gymnasts based on who is friends outside of the gym, and we split girls up who would normally gravitate to each other. We also split them up by ability and what events they typically compete on. Beam is the most mentally tough event to compete because it is easy to lose focus or get nervous and wobble or fall. When we have an idea of who our top six beam competitors are, we start having them all practice beam together. They do a circuit which includes a visualization station, beam dance on floor with a blind fold on, a rest station, and routines on our three beams. This circuit gets them used to training and competing together. They support each other through setbacks at practice, so when it comes time to compete in a big meet they feel like a cohesive group.

Phil Jackson, former NBA coach with an all-time record of eleven NBA championships, once said, “The strength of the team is each individual member. The strength of each member is the team.”¹⁰

This quote sums up everything I have been explaining with my stories about team building. Gymnastics is an individual sport, but Essex High School Gymnastics is a team sport. The girls become a family. The team cannot be strong if each individual member does not have a place on the team or feel supported by their teammates.

2.3 Communication

*Communication leads to community, that is, to understanding, intimacy and mutual valuing.*¹¹

- Rollo May (Author of “Love and Will” 1969)

I was Ashley Neary’s assistant coach for five years. I started coaching because I could not stay away from gymnastics. Being a gymnast will always be part of my identity. Throughout my years coaching with Ashley, I have grown to appreciate her strength in communication. Year after year, she builds a team culture of respect, discipline, and love. On the first day of the 2015-16 season, she told me that I should start preparing to do her job because she would be stepping down from being the head coach at the end of the season. I started taking notes and keeping track of all the little details that make Ashley such a successful coach in preparation to be the head coach the following year. I spent a lot of time that year worrying about being the head coach. I worried about whether I would be good enough and have enough time to really put in the

¹⁰ Phil Jackson: “The strength of the team...”, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/527132-the-strength-of-the-team-is-each-individual-member-the>.

¹¹ Rollo May Quotes, BrainyQuote, https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/rollo_may_389414.

same effort that Ashley put into planning and creating team activities. At the beginning of the 2016-17 season, Ashley surprised us by coming back to coach for one more year. I felt overwhelming relief that I would get one more year to coach alongside her and continue learning from her.

Ashley started every season by putting out an email to all the gymnasts' parents giving them a brief overview of who the coaches are, what our program is all about, and our rules and expectations for the girls. After the first week of tryouts, we sit down to meet with each girl on the team. We congratulate them for making the team and tell them how we look forward to working with them. We ask them how they think the first week of practice went and we ask them if they have any questions for us. We tell them to start thinking about their goals for this season. We stress the importance of open communication to each gymnast. We tell them, if you ever have an issue, you should come to us right away so we can help you. We can provide clarity if you are confused about a decision we have made, or we can help straighten out a team issue if you sense any tension between teammates. We talk to the upperclassmen about welcoming the underclassmen and making them feel a part of the group. We go over the school's training rule policy, which is a no tolerance policy. If an athlete is caught using tobacco, drinking alcohol or using any other illegal drugs, they are removed from their team immediately. It is important to have conversations with each of the girls about making healthy and smart choices outside of the gym. We stress to them that they need to make a commitment to their teammates for the whole season and that includes following training rules. We also talk to the girls about the difference between high school gymnasts and private club gymnastics teams. On a high school team, competition time is not

guaranteed to anyone. Each spot on the lineup is earned. High school gymnastics is more team oriented and club gymnastics is more individual oriented.

In the weeks following our first individual meetings, we also have whole team conversations. We set the expectations for practices, work ethic, timeliness, responsibility and communication at the very beginning of the season so the girls know what they are getting into. Ashley set the bar very high for the girls. She did not tolerate athletes walking into practice late without letting us know, or missing practice if there is not a valid reason. Sometimes I worried that we were expecting too much of them, but the girls always step up and meet our expectations. They see the commitment that we give to the program and they want to be a part of it.

At various times in the season we have short meetings with our captains to stay on the same page as them and make sure they are feeling supported. In one of our meetings with the captains last season, the girls asked for more motivation and words of encouragement from us. It was about halfway through the season and they thought the team could use something to keep the morale up. We started reading the girls a quote at the beginning of practice and then we had the girls think about the quote and think about and share in the circle how it might impact their intention for practice. We would go around the circle sharing our intentions for practice. Some of the girls really took the activity seriously and came up with thoughtful answers. It helped the team stay focused and motivated because each girl tried to live up to her intention that she had verbalized to the team. As presidential speech writer, James Humes, said, “The art of communication is the language of leadership.” Ashley has exemplified this statement. She has shown me how to be a leader and a role model for the athletes.

I started this section on communication by expressing my anxiety about becoming a head coach. As I sat and wrote about our team traditions and routines, I did not feel anxious about leading the conversations I described myself. This reminds me of a phrase from Norman Rosenthal's book *The Gift of Adversity*. He explained how he used to dislike Sunday evenings because he would worry that Monday was approaching and there would be work and responsibilities. He reflected on this life experience and said, "Things always feel better on Monday."¹² This helped me realize that I should not borrow trouble and worry unnecessarily. There is no use worrying about the future when you cannot control what the future will bring. I spend time worrying, reflecting on my decisions, and going through moments of self-criticism. When I catch myself worrying unnecessarily, I try to let the negative thoughts go and I focus on relaxing and being in the moment.

¹² Rosenthal, Norman E. *The Gift of Adversity: The Unexpected Benefits of Life's Difficulties, Setbacks, and Imperfections*. (Place of publication not identified: Penguin Books, 2014), 138.

Chapter 3. What it Takes

3.1 Trust

*Trust is built in very small moments... if you're always choosing to turn away, then trust erodes in a relationship very gradually, very slowly.*¹³

– John Gottman (Professor of Psychology and Author)

It was tremendously important to me to have a coach who I could trust when I was growing up. As I reflect on my time in high school and college, I have come to realize I had a hard time trusting some of my coaches. I went to a school in New Jersey for my freshman year of college and I transferred after one year. My coach in NJ was the only paid track coach for the men's and women's track and field programs. He coached every track event and all the athletes in the program. Because he coached so many of us, I did not develop a personal connection with him. In January, in the middle of the indoor track season, I sprained my ankle doing an agility drill. I was doing a workout on my own in one section of the indoor facility where we all trained, while my teammates were doing their workouts separately. I was standing in place and jumping off two feet over hurdles that were lined up. I would land over one hurdle and immediately take off to jump over the next hurdle. On my third hurdle of the row, I came down on my left ankle a little crooked and rolled it. All my weight caused the ligaments to stretch. I heard my tendon pop and I knew I did something bad. I remember sitting there for a couple of minutes before one of my teammates noticed I was hurt. My coach came over after my teammate and seemed annoyed that I was hurt. Seeing the annoyed look on this face and

¹³ Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*, (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2012), 50.

hearing his sigh of frustration made me feel angry that I was not being supported. My coach asked my teammate to bring me to the training room to get checked out.

Over the next two weeks I recovered from my bad ankle sprain as quickly as I could. I had a full scholarship to the college to compete pole vault for the track team. I felt guilty for being hurt so I wanted to get back into training as quickly as I could. The training facilities at the school did not lend themselves well to helping me ease back into training. We trained at the town armory which served as a track, tennis, and basketball facility for the city. We pole vaulted on the school's tennis courts twice a week. We would set up the pole vault pit at one end of the tennis court and then have about forty feet to run (a typical approach can be from forty to ninety feet long). There was no place to plant our poles when we reached the pit because pole vaulting requires a "box" or a declining slant in the ground that you slide the pole into when you take off. We could not dig a hole out of the tennis courts, so we planted on the flat surface. With a short place to run, and no box to plant into, our training area was limited. I spent my first couple practices back from my injury doing small drills in the armory. My coach did not want me running much or doing any agility drills. He thought it would be safe for me to practice my run and take off for pole vault by running and jumping onto the high jump mats. This way, I could practice my approach and take off jump, and have a soft landing.

Unfortunately, I was favoring my left foot a little too much, and on one jump, I landed with my right foot stuck out on the mat. I twisted my right foot and it became tangled in the soft mat. I felt immediate pain as I landed. With the immediate pain came shame. I had hurt myself again. This time I hobbled off the mat and told a couple of my teammates what had happened. It was a Friday afternoon and it was the end of practice.

I thought to myself, *maybe coach doesn't have to find out*. The Armory was a couple of blocks from the school so my friends took turns carrying me on their backs all the way to the training room. My ankle was wrapped up by the athletic trainer and I was put back on crutches. I spent the weekend laying low. Unfortunately, when Monday came I was still on crutches. My coach was surprised, angry and confused how I was hurt again. This meant that I would spend more time sitting on the side of the track watching practices.

I spent another two weeks being ignored by him and feeling guilty for not being able to practice. I went to every practice and sat and watched my teammates train. I felt incredibly lonely and frustrated. When it came time for our championship meet, I had been back at practice for maybe two weeks. In preparation for the meet, my ankles were taped up and I also had strong ankle braces over the tape. I will never forget this one moment that defined my attitude for the rest of the year. We were walking in the parking garage towards the building where we would be competing. My coach was talking to one of my teammates about the meet and he turned to me and said, "Now do not be a weenie today like Mary". I was furious. How could he be calling me a weenie? I had just spent the past month in pain and I never once complained to him. He did not even talk to me at practice to give me a chance to tell him how frustrated I was with my injury and how badly I wanted to be training. I was not a weenie and I wanted to make sure my coach knew that. I competed that day, and jumped higher than I ever had in my life. I had jumped 10'9" in high school and I jumped 10'10" that day which was good enough for third place in the conference and a school record in pole vault. I turned my negative energy into drive to compete.

It is my nature to be a competitor. I am not sure if my coach intentionally picked on me to fuel my competitive side, but he succeeded. After the meet, he took back his words and told me I was not a “weenie” anymore but I still did not trust him. When I accomplish something great, I want my coach to tell me he is proud of me. I learned that day that you cannot build relationships with people by fueling them with negativity. To be a great coach, you need your athletes to trust you.

When I transferred schools, my new coach was a nice guy, but also a little socially awkward. Pole vault can be a very mental sport. Running full speed and planting a thirteen-foot pole into a hole in the ground can play tricks with your mind. Negative thoughts bounce around in your head from time to time. *What if I plant crooked? What if I do not have enough speed and I do not make it onto the mat?* It takes a trustworthy coach to talk you into being confident in yourself. I went through a mental block for about two months during my senior year of college. I went to see the sports psychologist and I confided in my teammates for support, but when it came down to it, I needed to be able to trust my coach. He was the one giving me feedback after each vault and standing next to the runway watching me vault. I did not fully trust him. My coach helped me jump twelve feet by the middle of my junior year. I had set a school record and was consistently placing well in the conference meets. Then my last year and a half of competing, I did not improve any more. I was consistently jumping just short of twelve feet and feeling frustrated. There are many excuses I can make for why I did not get any better. I cannot change the past though. When I look back, I am grateful for the experiences I had, regardless of my own pressures to reach bigger highs and accomplish more goals.

As a young athlete I had amazing coaches who I had complete trust in. Thinking back, I did not realize how much I appreciated my relationship with them until I had unfavorable experiences in college. As a freshman in college, I started going back to my high school to help coach gymnastics and track because I liked being around my old coaches and continuing to learn from them. My club gymnastics coach, Stano, was like a third parent to me. He was my coach from age eleven to age eighteen and I spent thirteen hours a week with him for all those years. He moved to the US from Slovakia and signed a contract to work for the club gym, where I trained. Stano taught me to “go for it” when learning new skills because I could trust his spotting. He taught me to be self-motivated, to ignore distractions in the gym, and he taught me the value in repetition and good conditioning. My high school pole vault coach, Dave, was another coach who I looked up to in many ways. He had a genuine love for the sport of track and field. He enjoyed every day of coaching and had fun with us. My teammates and I liked going to track practice because Dave shared his wisdom; he made us better athletes, and he made us all feel good about ourselves. My high school gymnastics coaches Kara and Ashley built a team community. They taught me to trust myself, be confident, and enjoy the experience of being on a high school sports team.

Dr. Bob Nelson, one of the world’s leading experts on employee motivation, and author of *1001 Ways to Reward Your Employees* said, “You get the best effort from others not by lighting a fire beneath them, but by building a fire within.”¹⁴ My coach in NJ would light fires beneath us and my high school track coaches would light fires within

¹⁴ Bob Nelson Quotes, BrainyQuote, https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/bob_nelson_194823.

us. I want to help fuel my athletes' passions and interests. Sometimes I work out alongside my athletes. During the gymnastics season, I will do conditioning with the girls and during the track season, I will do the running workouts with my team. I think it helps them see me as a human, not just the bossy person making them struggle. I tell them that it is okay to feel pain at the end of a hard workout and I am truly empathizing with them when I am in pain too. The girls on the gymnastics team sometimes ask me to show them a skill. One of my gymnasts was afraid of a specific jump on the balance beam and when I tried to convince her it was not scary she said, "If you get up on the beam and do one, then I will." She needed to see it was possible. Sometimes I pole vault with the track athletes while they are practicing. It makes me happy to practice with them because my pole vaulting days are behind me and I miss it. It shows the kids I am having fun with them. I can set a good example for them by showing them how to do certain pole vault drills or parts of the vault. I also gain my athletes' trust by communicating with them and helping them work through setbacks. When they are sore, tired, or injured I talk with them about ways to recover instead of making them feel ashamed. When they are going through a mental block, I help them understand what they are afraid of and I help them work past it.

The stories in this section on trust explain how I have come to view this one aspect of coaching. I am a product of my own life experiences. As Anais Nin puts it, "We see the world not as it is, but as we are."¹⁵ I believe in the importance of building trust because I have seen the benefits of having a coach I look up to and trust and I have

¹⁵ Norman Rosenthal, *The Gift of Adversity*. (Penguin Books, 2014), 92.

experienced the frustrations of having a coach that I do not connect with and do not easily trust. In my experience, coaches who inspire their athletes have more success building trust and respect. Once trust is earned, the rest is easy.

3.2 Grit

*I won't just have a job; I'll have a calling. I'll challenge myself every day. When I get knocked down, I'll get back up. I may not be the smartest person in the room, but I'll strive to be the grittiest.*¹⁶

- Angela Duckworth (America academic psychologist, Professor, Author)

Being an athlete has taught me a lot about grit. When I was in high school I learned how to balance a busy schedule between difficult school work and sports practices that ranged from four to seven days a week. I trained at a gymnastics club year-round, which required me to practice four days a week, for three hours each practice and four hours on Sundays. During the high school gymnastics and track seasons I would juggle my schedule between practicing four days a week at the gymnastics club in the evenings, and six days a week after school. I did not know what it felt like to go home after an eight-hour school day and have nothing planned. Most nights I would not get home from school and practice until 8:30 p.m. and then I would eat dinner and start my homework. When I went to college, I started my day with practice from 7:00 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. Then I would shower in the locker room at the gym, go to my classes, and then the library to study. I would not go home to my parents' house (where I lived to save money) until the evening when my day was over. Balancing this busy life style and

¹⁶ Angela Duckworth. *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, (New York, NY: Scribner, 2016), Preface.

having a competitive nature has taught me to persevere through hectic weeks and tiring days.

I learned to challenge myself when I felt like giving up. I studied for tests late at night or on Saturday evenings when the rest of my friends were being social. I pushed myself at practice when my body was tired and sore. I would not allow myself to be the type of person to slack off. I set personal goals in all aspects of my life and I did not want to let myself down. I loved being a high school and college athlete. Since I already loved what I was doing, I had the intrinsic motivation to work hard and be gritty when, as Duckworth pointed out in the quote in the epilogue, I was not the smartest (or most athletic) person in the room.

As a teacher and coach, I am learning that grit is not an easy skill to teach someone. Students are living in a different time of life. They have access to the internet almost everywhere they go and have instant connection with communication and information when they need it. If they do not know something, they can pull out their cell phone and look it up in a matter of seconds. Students need help learning how to persevere when something is challenging because it does not come naturally. When my students do not understand how to solve a problem they are quick to ask me for the answer or turn to their friend to see how he or she did it. I am realizing how important it is to challenge students and design learning activities that are thought-provoking, require reasoning, and problem solving. In 2014, I went to the Rowland Foundation conference at UVM. Angela Duckworth was the keynote speaker. She is famous for her book, *Grit, The Power of Passion and Perseverance*. She told us some pretty simple ideas about grit that helped me think about how to teach grit to my students. She told us that “80% of

success in life is just showing up.”¹⁷ You can be the most talented person, but it does not matter unless you show up. For my students this means coming to class and staying in class. Just being present every day for school is half the battle. I learned that if you have a growth mindset and a desire to learn, intelligence can be developed. I want to help my students persevere, think positively, and hopefully inspire them to want to learn.

Duckworth explained that it is important to find what you are passionate about and follow through with it. I think this concept can also apply to athletics. Talent cannot help you if you are not passionate about what you are doing. If you want to be a good athlete, you need to show up to every practice, be attentive, and put in the hard work. It is an ongoing process for me to instill these ideas in my athletes. I have a difficult time working with athletes who are simply going through the motions and do not have the innate competitive drive and grit to get through a workout. I am learning that I cannot make everyone want to be at practice every day, so I must let it go when one of my athletes is having a bad day. I also learned from Angela Duckworth that it is important to have a support system that is psychologically distanced. Duckworth explained that we experience our own mistakes very egotistically. We are hard on ourselves when we mess up. Our teachers, coaches, friends, and family are psychologically distanced from our mistakes and can tell us not to give up. As a coach, I need to remind myself that I am psychologically distanced from each of my athletes and I can be the sounding board for their frustrations and insecurities. When they are having a bad day, I can be gritty for them.

¹⁷ Angela Duckworth, “Developing Character: Student Achievement and Socio-Emotional Learning” (speech, Burlington, VT, October 30, 2014).

3.3 Belonging

*Because true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world, our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance.*¹⁸

- Brené Brown (Author specializing in vulnerability, shame, and empathy)

I grew up a middle child in a loving family. I got along with my siblings, and even though I was shy in school, I had many friends. I met my best friend, Samantha, in the third grade and we stayed best friends throughout high school. She was always there for me and we did everything together. Because of her, I never really felt lonely. In middle school, all the girls started growing, looking pretty, having their first kisses, and getting boyfriends. I did not grow, or get prettier, or get a boyfriend. I was the cute one who looked like she was two years younger than everyone else in the class. For the most part, I was okay with who I was. I did not spend a lot of time worrying about how I looked or if others liked me. I had gymnastics and that gave me self-confidence and independence. I typically did not feel lonely or left out, because when I went to gymnastics practice, I belonged.

Sports carried me through high school and into college. The day my parents dropped me off in Jersey City, NJ and left me alone in my new dorm room, I cried. It was the first time in my life that I would have to make all new friends and set up my own community. After two months of feeling terribly homesick and lost, I finally started feeling like I belonged there, thanks to the track team. I made close friends and felt like I had a new family. When I transferred back to Vermont I was very sad that it meant

¹⁸ Brown, *Daring Greatly*, 145-146.

leaving my friends in New Jersey. I attended a much bigger school in Vermont and I did not live on campus my first year. Once again, I was struggling to make new friends. If it were not for the Track and Field program, I would not have enjoyed school. The track was my home. As Christopher Phillips says in his book, *Socrates Café*, “Home is a place, a special place, where we each in a certain sense reside.”¹⁹ Running every morning, lifting weights, and pole vaulting made my college experience better than I could have hoped for. I finally felt like I found the place where I could be home.

Now that I am a teacher and a coach, my “home,” is on the track or in the gym being involved with the sports I love and the athletes that seek my guidance. I hope that I get to help kids like myself find their sense of belonging. The world we live in is so uncertain. I want to give kids at least one certainty in their life and a sense of belonging. The gymnastics team at Essex High School is a very small tight knit group. The coaches help build the close team culture, but it is not difficult. The gymnasts have a lot in common and it is a small group so they get to know each other very quickly. The track team, on the other hand, is about ten times larger and has the most diverse group of athletes in the school. Our goal for this team is not complete unification. We are just hoping everyone knows each other’s names by the end of the season. In the smaller event groups though, the athletes get a better sense of belonging. They see the same faces every day and they all have at least one thing in common, they like the same track events.

¹⁹ Christopher Phillips, *Socrates Café: A Fresh Taste of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2003), 60.

There is one athlete on our team, pseudonym of John, who moved to Essex from another school district in the middle of the school year last year. His guidance counselor put him in one of my chemistry classes at the end of November, in the middle of the semester, and told me the student was coming from a tough home situation and things were hopefully looking better for him here at Essex. The counselor told me that John was very kind, but he has not had it easy and he might not transition into my class easily. I greeted John on the first day and assured him that he was joining a welcoming and friendly group of students. I helped him make a connection with one of the other students in the class and made sure not to overwhelm him with too much chemistry information. The next class John did not come back. I emailed his counselor to ask if I should worry, and the counselor told me John was going to be in different classes but he appreciated my help with his transition. The counselor said in his email, “He got a very good impression from you, and I would like to thank you for your part in helping him join our community. Believe it or not, the sense he got from his short time with you really helped get him start his time as a Hornet.”²⁰ This email, as simple as it was, felt like one of the biggest triumphs I have had in my teaching career. Knowing that I am making a small difference in students’ lives helps me get through the tough teaching days. All I hope to accomplish each day is to help students feel like they belong and they are wanted at school.

John joined our track team in the spring. I was able to see him grow each day at practice. He is a hard worker and he is extremely responsible, respectful and helpful. He

²⁰ Andrew Roy, email message to Mary Krug. December 2, 2016. [personal communication]

made new friends on the team and I think being a part of the track team helped him build his community and strengthen his sense of belonging at Essex. John is not alone in this regard. There are many kids on our team who feel more connected and enjoy being part of a team. One afternoon we sat down as a group at the end of practice and asked the kids to go around and say their name and one expectation they have for their teammates during practice and outside of practice. Out of the forty or so athletes in the group, about half of them said they want their teammates to be supportive. One athlete said he wants his teammates to be his family. Another athlete said that she expects her teammates to be her friends during practice and at school too. It was powerful to have so many kids agreeing that they want to feel like they are part of a positive, welcoming, and hardworking team. It made my job easy because they came up with all the expectations that I was going to ask of them. I am proud of my athletes for taking the discussion to heart.

As I was reading the book *The Gift of Adversity* I stumbled on a quote by Aesop, the Greek storyteller. He said, “No act of kindness, however small, is ever wasted.”²¹ This resonated with me because I have been reminded of the benefits of kindness. Sometimes it takes extra effort to go out of my way to be kind to others. I always try to be friendly and approachable, but sometimes I have busy and tiring days. It is rare to see immediate rewards from being kind to others. Teenagers are not always grateful for their high school chemistry teacher or their coach who is making them run six 200m sprints. I will remind myself of this quote, and of John, the next time I am feeling grumpy or too

²¹ Rosenthal, *The Gift of Adversity*, 115.

busy to take a couple minutes to start up a conversation with one of my students. I will remember that kindness it is never a waste of energy.

3.4 Perfectionism

*You cannot ever reach perfection, but you can believe in an asymptote toward which you are ceaselessly striving.*²²

- Paul Kalanithi (Neurosurgeon and Writer)

At a young age, I learned how to be a perfectionist. At gymnasts practice, my coach would tell me to get up on the balance beam and stick ten full turns; if I fell off the beam, I would have to start over. I was told to stick five bar routines and I could not move on until I completed the assignment. My coaches would have me do repetitions of many different skills on every event. I was told repeatedly that my legs were not straight enough or that my shoulders needed to be more flexible. I have not competed in a gymnastics competition in over eight years. At the time, I did not fully understand how the sport molded my thinking. The more perfect I was, the better I would be at gymnastics. In the sport of gymnastics there is no room for messy attempts, or thoughtless actions. I knew that it was impossible to be perfect, but I tried to be as close to perfect as I could.

In other areas of my life I did not care so much about being perfect. I tried hard in school, but I always knew my sister would get better grades than me so I could leave room for errors. I tried to care about what clothes I wore and how pretty I looked, but I

²² Paul Kalanithi and Abraham Verghese. *When Breath Becomes Air* (New York, NY: Random House, 2016), 115.

also knew that my best friend was prettier than me and always had better clothes and makeup. I cared about being good at gymnastics, so that is where I focused my perfectionism. I always thought of myself as an easy-going person. I was a middle child, so I learned to get along with both of my siblings. I hated conflict, so whenever there was a fight at home, I tried to be the peacekeeper. Later in my life I started hearing from others that I had a “type A personality.” I did not believe people at first; I do not think of myself as an uptight person who is afraid to make mistakes. After hearing this from a couple different people I started to consider how others perceive me. At first, I was offended that people did not see me as an easy-going person, but I have come to appreciate my type-A tendencies.

It is impossible to be a perfect teacher. There are way too many variables that go into a day of teaching to ever expect to be perfect at your job. I realize this, but I still strive towards perfection. I know that I would not have gotten through college, student teaching, or my first year of teaching in a small rural school in Vermont if I were not trying to be the best person I could be. Now that I am teaching at a school I love and I am teaching the classes I choose to teach, I can look back on the harder days and be proud that I put in the effort to do the best work I could. I can also realize that some of my beliefs were unhealthy. My perfectionism is not necessarily a good characteristic.

In many instances, my perfectionist trait has also caused me unnecessary worry, jealousy, and unrest. Robert Nash has quoted Aristotle in class discussions explaining any virtue taken to an extreme becomes a vice. Sometimes I try too hard to be perfect and I end up letting myself down. When I try to be a perfect teacher, friend, or girlfriend and I do not succeed, I get mad at myself. I spend hours trying to calm my mind and stop

the tears from rushing down my cheeks. I try telling myself it is okay to make mistakes. This attempt usually is not enough to stop my ugly perfectionist brain. I need someone else to talk me out of my irrational thinking. Anne Lamott explained in her book *Bird by Bird* how perfectionism can act like a muscle cramp of our psychic muscles. She said, “They cramp around our wounds – the pain from our childhood, the losses and disappointments of adulthood, the humiliations suffered in both – to keep us from getting hurt in the same place again, to keep foreign substances out.”²³ This take on perfectionism helped me realize that when I am trying too hard to be perfect, it is usually out of insecurity and a need to protect myself from past mistakes. I need to learn how to be more forgiving with myself. I will work on finding a balance where I strive for perfection, only with the knowledge that it will make me work harder at what I am doing. I must not expect myself to always be perfect.

Now that I have come to this realization, I can use it to help my students and athletes. I have seen my athletes beat themselves up for imperfect behavior time and time again but I have not known what to say or how to redirect it. I can empathize with them now. I can use the lessons I learned from my own battle with perfectionism to help them see themselves differently. I know my athletes will be successful people because I have watched them put in hard work and dedication for something that they love. They do not need to please everyone in their lives to be loved and accepted. They do not need to get perfect scores or perfect grades to be considered a good student. They also do not need to be perfect gymnasts. Perfection is impossible and every time we expect perfection we

²³ Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird* (New York: Anchor Books, 1997), 29.

are setting ourselves up for failure. My athletes join the gymnastics team to have fun, be a part of a community, get stronger, learn discipline, become better athletes, and learn more about themselves. They do not join the team to be the best and have personal success over team success. Sometimes winning is a nice reward that comes with all the other outcomes.

3.5 Fun

Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life.

-Confucius²⁴ (Chinese teacher, editor, politician and philosopher)

Every summer I spend my days on Lake Champlain coaching gymnastics to kids of all ages. When was eleven years old, I spent my first week at Dunkley's Gymnastics camp and I have not missed a summer since. Working at camp is the definition of a job that feels like I am not working. I have been a part of the camp family for over fifteen years and I cannot imagine my life without summer camp. I have made lasting connections with the owners of camp, my friends that I went to camp with growing up, the counselors I have worked beside for years, and the campers that come back every summer excited to see me.

I grew up doing club gymnastics and I coached at my club gym for a couple of years. Club gymnastics is a very different type of atmosphere from high school gymnastics and camp. Now, I occasionally work at some of the club gymnastics meets and I substitute at the club gym. When I work at the club gymnastics meets I see girls that I know from camp. Sometimes one or two girls will smile at me, but most of them

²⁴ Rosenthal, *The Gift of Adversity*, 38.

have a very serious composure. They look nervous and afraid to make any mistakes. I cannot help but remember how they acted at camp. I get to know them when they are having the best time of their lives. They are goofy, relaxed, loud, messy, and full of laughs at camp. I notice the large contrast as I watch them compete at this high stress gymnastics meet. If someone who had never met these girls saw them at one of the gymnastics meets, they would think that the sport trains girls to be robots.

I have heard negative comments from some adults about being involved in the sport of gymnastics, but I have never understood how people could have a negative opinion about the sport that I love and could not imagine my life without it. As an observer at that gymnastics meet, I was far enough removed from the kids and the competition that I could reflect on atmosphere of the gym. I thought that the sport seemed too stressful for a young girl. I watched the coaches reprimand the girls when they messed up and I watch some girls cry because they did not perform well. I never understood more clearly the importance of the times where kids get to have fun and be goofy. I realized my gratitude for camp and my part in making the girls have fun with the sport.

When I coach gymnastics and track at the high school, I like to integrate some fun activities into practices. I have explained previously how the gymnastics team has “blue and gold” days to let the girls compete in fun games and activities. We also play fun music at practice and the girls will dance and sing to the music when they are waiting for a turn on the bars or vault. At track practice, I will occasionally have the kids play a game as part of their conditioning or at the end of practice. They particularly like competing in a game called “human knot,” where they stand in a circle and grab hands

with random people across the circle, then try to get the knot of people untangled without letting go. The kids enjoy the experience of working as a team and to try to be successful. They cheer when they find out we are going to play the human knot game. Last spring the kids remembered a time the previous year when we were unsuccessful at untying the knot. They were excited to see if they could do better. My track athletes are very goofy kids. I always catch them dancing, laughing, and having fun while they warm up or wait for their turn on the runway. It is important for them to work hard at practice, but I have come to value the importance of having my athletes enjoy what they are doing. They look forward to coming to practice and seeing each other. I realize my role in helping them have fun with their sport.

Chapter 4. Coaching as a Vocation

4.1 Connectivity

*At the deepest levels of human experience, there is story-overlap between and among all people, no matter how superficially different.*²⁵

-Robert Nash and DeMethra LaSha Bradley

Who am I? This statement can be answered in a number of ways. I am a 26-year-old white, middle class, agnostic, science teacher, gymnastics coach, track coach, athlete, student, daughter, sister, partner, friend, and colleague. I do not believe that these descriptions accurately define who I am. I change every day, every time I learn something new, or bring someone new into my life. I think the statement that more accurately describes me is that I am a product of the people I surround myself with. Sydnee Viray, one of my professors in the Interdisciplinary Studies in Education program at UVM, taught me a lesson about connectivity. She taught me that we can be connected to our ancestors through familial lineages and we can also be connected to our ancestors through our education journey. I am going to share a couple of stories about my ancestors who have shaped me into the person I am today.

Ruth Dunkley McGowan is not a blood relative of mine, but she has helped raise me as a coach, teacher, and mentor to children and adolescents. I met her when I was eleven-years-old when I first attended her sleep away gymnastics camp, Dunkley's Gymnastics Camp, in South Hero, VT. Since then, Ruth has been an influence in my life by bringing me into coaching through her counselor in training program at camp. I went

²⁵ Robert J. Nash and DeMethra LaSha Bradley, *Me-Search and Re-Search: A Guide for Writing Scholarly Personal Narrative Manuscripts* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Pub., 2011), 55.

on to become a counselor when I turned eighteen. She brought me into coaching in public schools when I became her assistant coach to her middle school gymnastics team. From there I went on to coach the gymnastics team at Essex High School. I have been a counselor at her summer camp for nine summers. I have experienced her passion for kids throughout the years that I have worked with her. I believe her passion for working with kids has transferred to me. She loves all kids and accepts everyone. Ruth loves me like I am one of her own kids. She has never-ending energy to inspire her staff and show us how to work hard and have fun at our job. When she is not busy running camp, she jumps at the opportunity to coach bars with me. I love listening to her give corrections to athletes and inspire them to try new things. I would not have the passion for gymnastics, coaching, or teaching without her influence.

Adam Weiss is a high school biology teacher. He is the man who helped me find my passion for science. I took his advanced biology class during my senior year of high school and fell in love with science. I went on to major in biology in college thinking I wanted to become a physician assistant or a pharmacist when I grew up. By my junior year of college reality was starting to set in and I needed to figure out what I was going to do when I graduate. After a couple conversations with my mom, I realized that I wanted to have a job that would continue to let me coach after work. I thought about Adam Weiss and how I would enjoy having his job. A couple of months after graduation, I was back in my high school, student teaching alongside Adam. He nicknamed me “Radar” after the M.A.S.H. character who is a sidekick who always has the next step thought out and ready for the boss. I began to feel like I belonged in my new teaching role. Adam is full of passion for biology and for his students. He makes connections with his students

with ease and becomes a teacher that students seek out for help and support. I felt so comfortable being his mentee because I already had a connection with him from high school. When I was in high school he made me feel important in his classroom because he recognized my accomplishments in gymnastics and track by hanging up newspaper clippings on his “wall of fame.” Throughout my time student teaching with Adam I learned the importance of making connections with students. He helped me plan fun and creative lessons that would get the students engaged. I watched his interactions with the kids and tried to portray the same attitude towards them. Adam is a well-respected teacher by all of his students because they make personal connections with him, and they want to learn from him. Now I am Adam’s coworker and I still look up to him as a senior member of our department and someone who I know will always support me. He will be there to help me if I ever need it and he will recognize my little accomplishments in the classroom.

Ruth and Adam are two of my educational ancestors. They are my role models in my profession because they work with open hearts. Nancy Aronie explained in her book, *Writing from the Heart*, that anyone can turn your head, but it is rare to find mentors out there who turn your heart. She said, “Heart rules never change, they come from the heart, by the heart, and for the heart.”²⁶ Ruth and Adam are truly passionate about what they do. I think if they only had a couple of years left to live, they would continue doing the work they do because they love it.

²⁶ Nancy Aronie, *Writing from the Heart – Tapping the Power of Your Inner Voice*. (New York, NY: Hyperion. 1998), 196.

I want to be someone who does not just turn people's heads; I want to make connections with people's hearts just like Adam and Ruth. I care a lot about my athletes and over the many years that I work with them throughout their high school careers, I build strong connections with them. The group of twelfth graders that I am working with this year have been my athletes since they were in middle school. I am as invested in their success as they are. Aronie stated, "Imitation passion breeds imitation people. Imitation people will mostly do what is expected, but it won't be coming from the heart, it will be coming from the head."²⁷ I do not have imitation passion for my work with my gymnasts, therefore, I think that they will work hard at practice because they love being there, not because it is what they think they should be doing.

I am the best teacher and coach that I can be, because of the people I surround myself with. I am the best human I can be, because of my parents, Tom and Carol Krug. They are my blood ancestors who have inspired me and shown me how to be my best self. I have learned many lessons from them as I have grown up with their influence. Many believe that lessons are taught by giving advice or telling a story, but the most valuable lessons I have learned from my parents have been from observing them. I want to share these lessons that I have learned from my parents and use them to better myself.

A coworker of mine, who knows my family, recently asked me for my mom's secret. She asked, "How did your mom raise such good kids?" At the time, I shrugged my shoulders and told her, "I am not sure." I have been thinking more about the answer and I think I have grown up to be the person I am today because my mom modeled hard

²⁷Ibid., 196.

work. She never told me to be something she wanted or do something she thought I should do. She has always been supportive of my decisions and she has done all she can to make sure I feel supported. I watched my mom work hard to raise her kids, keep our home clean and stocked with food, drive us to all our after-school activities, and work full time with delinquent children and teens at a juvenile detention center. I knew that she was a hard worker and I began to expect hard work from myself. I wanted to live up to her hard work.

My dad has shown me how to be the most genuine and caring person I can be. He has modeled unconditional love for me and he expresses his love often. He tells me that I am his hero and I am his best friend. Growing up, he was my biggest fan at all my gymnastics and track meets. Now that I am an adult, he cherishes the time he gets to spend with me and he will frequently thank me for having dinner with him or hitting golf balls with him when I have the free time. He always walks me to my car when I am leaving my parents' house so he can say goodbye. He shows me that he is there for me emotionally when I come home to my parents' house in a bad mood. He will listen to my problems and help me find solutions that I can work with. He enjoys getting to talk to me and hear about my day.

My parents have helped me realize that I always want to be a hard worker and a caring person. I want to share these qualities with my students and athletes. My hope is that I can model these qualities the same way my parents have modeled for me. As John Wooden said in his book, *A Lifetime of Observations and Reflections On and Off the Court*, "A leader's most powerful ally is his or her own example. Leaders do not just talk

about doing something; they do it.”²⁸ I do not want to lecture my students and athletes or try to tell them what to do. Instead, I want them to see me working hard and being compassionate and want to be more like me.

4.2 Why Coach?

*Make the effort to do the best of which you are capable. Can anyone possibly do more than that?*²⁹

- John Wooden (Famous UCLA Basketball coach from 1948-1975)

This section includes a piece I wrote in the Fall of 2017. The 2017-2018 gymnastics season has come and gone, but I wrote this section anticipating my new role as head coach.

As a new school year begins and I look ahead to being the new head coach of the Essex High School gymnastics team in the winter and the associate head coach of the track team in the spring, I do not have conceited thoughts about my accomplishments in getting these positions. Colleagues and community members have congratulated me on my new head coaching position and I have needed a moment in those instances to compose my thoughts and show them my gratitude. In my head I think to myself: *Why are you congratulating me? I haven't done anything yet. I have only set myself up for a huge responsibility, a lot of work, and a lot of people to let down if I do not do a good job.* I have moments of anxiety, fear, and self-doubt when I think about my job ahead.

²⁸ John R. Wooden, and Steve Jamison. *Wooden A Lifetime of Observations and Reflections On and Off the Court* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1997), 166.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 94.

I have been a significant member of the successful Essex gymnastics program as an athlete and assistant coach for the past twelve years. During those twelve years, Essex High School has remarkably won twelve straight state championships. I was a freshman when our team won for the first year of the streak and two years after graduating high school I became one of the assistant coaches of the team. My fear is that as I enter my first year of being the head coach, we may not be able to maintain this stellar record. The responsibility of maintaining this level of success can be overwhelming. Particularly in light of the depleted squad returning this year. I have carried this tradition and pride with me as part of my identity for a dozen years. Like most, I have handled loss and disappointment in my life and I handled those situations with the most grace and dignity I could. In this realm, however, this program has been blessed with so many years of unfettered victory and success. This season, our winning streak is in very real jeopardy. This being my first year as head coach would be particularly difficult for me professionally if we fall short of our thirteenth straight title.

I know I have been saying all along that winning is not everything and we join sports teams to have fun and be a part of a group, but there is the competitive side of me that I know will be devastated. I could make up all the excuses I want for why my team could fail, but no matter the outcome, I will carry the responsibility with me. For these reasons, I have trepidations about the start of the season.

To comfort myself I think back to the summer before my first year of teaching and I remember having the similar feelings about fear of failure. I was very nervous and doubtful that I would be able to do a good job. I had reoccurring dreams that I would be in front of the class without a lesson planned for the day. I would dream that my students were talking back to me and I could not handle their behavior. I would snap at them and curse at them in my dream. I am starting my fifth year in education and I recently had a dream that I was teaching my chemistry class and I had not set up the lab that the students were doing in class that day. The students started calling me names and ignoring my direction when I told them to sit down quietly, while I scrambled to get everything set up. I woke up in a panic feeling like I could not go to work. I made it to work and no students disrespected me. I survived my first day of teaching and I was none the worse for wear. One year of teaching soon became two, and now I am in year five. If I continue to trust myself, I am confident I will make it through this year of coaching and teaching with or without a thirteenth straight title. John Wooden, legendary men's basketball coach at UCLA whose teams won ten National Championships in twelve years including a record seven in a row, once said, "Do not measure yourself by what you've accomplished, but rather by what you should accomplish with your abilities."³⁰ If I change my attitude to focus on the future and stop dwelling in the past, I will have a better

³⁰ Wooden, *A Lifetime of Observations*, 94.

chance at success. I have the work ethic and the skill to coach a team of gymnasts; I just need to trust my abilities.

The negative thoughts that are stewing in my head bring me to wonder – how will I have a sustainable career as a coach and avoid burnout? I am currently drawing inspiration from the Essex High School teacher of the 2017-18 school year. The teacher of the year was announced on the first day of school during a faculty meeting. The recipient, Bill O’Neil, is a man who has been teaching for fifty-three years and who has coached three seasons of sports (soccer, hockey, and softball) for over twenty-five years and coached hockey and soccer for over forty years. This year is the first year that he is retired from coaching all three sports. I sat down to eat lunch with him during our freshman orientation day when many of the teachers were asked to monitor the lunch room. I asked about his coaching career and marveled at his dedication and longevity. I expressed to him how impressed I was with his commitment. It is evident that he loves sports and he loves the teams he coached for so long.

I hope I can thrive as a coach even half as long as Coach O’Neil. I think I have the same passion for athletics that he does. I love gymnastics and I love pole vault. My identity lies within these two sports and through coaching, I am fortunate to stay immersed in them. Failure and success is very important, but the part that gets me through the long seasons is not the sport alone, it is the players. My athletes make my job fun, meaningful, and fulfilling. Coach O’Neil’s dedication is universalizable for younger coaches and teachers like myself. I too would like to be model for others. I want people to see my love of

kids and my empathy towards others as something to strive for. When I doubt my life choices, I try to think about what grounds my life. Being a part of a close loving community is what living is all about. My profession is fueled by my drive to join kids together and help them find the joy in doing gymnastics and track and field, or learning about the world around them in biology, chemistry, or astronomy class.

There are usually a couple of athletes every year who remind me why I love coaching. One of my former gymnasts, Amelia, was an athlete who modeled the ideal coachable athlete. She was the hardest worker on the gymnastics team, a great leader, and a good sport. Last year, our gymnastics coaching staff nominated her for a school wide sportsmanship award, which was voted on by all the sports head coaches. Amelia won the award because we shared her story. Amelia was the runner up in the state gymnastics meet both her junior and senior year of high school by small margins. Both years she was favored to win with her performances and scores from the seasons leading up to states. She was constantly winning the All-Around in dual meets and she was the most consistent athlete on our team. Both years at the state meet, she made unfortunate and very unlikely errors which caused her to lose her lead by tenths of a point to her teammate. Amelia never showed her disappointment. She kept her composure because she knew the team's success was more important than her own. I was heartbroken for Amelia and wished I could rewind time to give her another shot. Amelia loved the sport, she loved her team, and she was grateful for her coaches. Living Amelia's story with her made me remember what it felt like when I was

competing. I worked hard and trusted my team and coaches like Amelia, yet I had better luck. Living her loss with her made me experience what it would have felt like if I had lost. I almost had more pain because the empathy I felt for her was so strong. I believed she deserved it one hundred times more than anyone else competing. Yet, it was out of my control. Amelia will always stand out in my mind and remind me why I coach. I am honored to work with kids who carry themselves with such class and dignity.

If I keep reminding myself that my love for coaching comes from making connections with the athletes, I will make it through the long days and the long high school sports seasons. Seeing my athletes' growth and watching their small successes each practice will help motivate me. The pressure I put on myself to be a winning coach is unnecessary and harmful. Wooden advises, "If you are trying to live up to expectations put on yourself by the media, parents, fans, your employer, or whatever else there may be, it going to affect you adversely because it brings on worry and anxiety."³¹ The next time I begin to worry about what the media, other teams, past coaches, or parents think, I will remind myself of the wisdom that John Wooden shared with his readers. The only thing that truly matters is that I find joy in helping my team succeed.

My role models Adam and Ruth both showed me how important it is to make small connections with students and athletes. I took this concept from them and realized that my connections with my athletes gives me the passion for

³¹ Ibid., 58.

coaching and the stamina to continue showing up and working hard at practices. In the long run, the trophies, medals, wins, and the number of state championships, will not matter. The connections will help me thrive and make coaching a sustainable career.

4.3 A Calling?

The Wild Rose

Sometimes hidden from me
in daily custom and in trust,
so that I live by you unaware
as by the beating of my heart,
suddenly you flare in my sight
a wild rose blooming at the edge
of thicket, grace and light
where yesterday was only shade,
and once again I am blessed, choosing
again, what I chose before.³²

- Wendell Berry (American novelist and poet)

After reading the book, *When Breath Becomes Air*, I wrote a letter to the author, Paul Kalanithi. Paul was diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer at the age of thirty-six. When he found out that the end of his life was imminent, he started writing this book. Paul was a neurosurgeon by trade, but he also had a passion for writing. I wrote this

³² Lamott, *Bird by Bird*, xxvi.

letter to Paul because I felt very connected to him after finishing his book. I felt like even though he would not read my letter, I could still send it out into the world for him.

Dear Paul,

I wish I had the opportunity to meet you. I think we have a lot in common and I would love to have a conversation with you about life, death, and what makes human life meaningful. I admire how you spent your early adulthood chasing your passion for literature and science. You chose the experienced life over the examined life because you understood the challenge of examining a life not lived. In reference to your summer as a cook at camp, you said, “every day felt full of life, and of the relationships that give life meaning.”³³ I immediately thought of my own summer camp. I too spend my summers at a camp, not where I learn more about science or teaching (my profession), but where I enjoy the beauty of Lake Champlain and immerse myself with human connections. I live every summer with my second family (the owners of the camp) and I play outside teaching kids gymnastics all day long.

I do not know if I have found my calling. You describe your pursuit of finding the meaning of life with such confidence. I wish I had that much confidence about something in my life. You stated, “Putting lifestyle first is how you find a job- not a calling.”³⁴ Did I put my lifestyle first when I decided to become a teacher? Being a teacher makes coaching and being a camp counselor

³³ Kalanithi, *When Breath Becomes Air*, 34.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

more convenient but I would like to think I am pursuing my career because it is a calling. I find meaning in life through the connections I make with people around me. I like advising my students and being a listening ear when one of my students is having a bad day or when they are excited about something and want to share.

You were so honest when you told the stories about your time as a resident in neurosurgery. You started working in the field because you wanted to face death in the eyes while also learn a valuable lesson. When is it time to do everything possible to save someone's life or when do you make the decision to stop forcing it? Sometimes living a shorter, better-quality life could be preferred over living a longer, poor-quality life. You said it more eloquently, "Before operating on a patient's brain, I realized, I must first understand his mind: his identity, his values, what makes his life worth living, and what devastation makes it reasonable to let that life end."³⁵ You not only wanted to be a good neurosurgeon, but you also wanted to help people. Your attitude about your job reminds me that I not only want to be a good teacher and coach, but I also want to make a difference in people's lives. You also wanted to be the person who helped patients cope with their news of brain cancer or a dramatic life change due to a brain injury. You did not just want to save lives, you also wanted to help people live better lives. You wanted to "not only deliver the clinical facts, but address

³⁵ Ibid., 98.

the human facts as well.”³⁶ When I am teaching, I want to help students learn the scientific facts and understand how these concepts relate to each of their lives.

You went through a time when you lost sight of your goals. You were going through the motions at work just going from one surgery to the next, forgetting that it was your job and your calling to make connections with your patients and do what was best for them. You expressed, “Amid the tragedies and failures, I feared I was losing sight of the singular importance of human relationships, not between patients and their families but between doctor and patient.”³⁷ Sometimes I can relate to that. I go through the motions of coaching and teaching just to get through the week. I take the easy way out by following the lesson plan of a coworker instead of being inventive and creating a plan that better suits the moods of my students. I forget that making connections with my students daily is what gets them hooked into the lesson. When I am merely the deliverer of information, they check out and lose interest in learning.

Contrary to losing sight of the importance of your work, you also talked about taking feelings from work home with you. Being completely absorbed in work and caring too deeply about work can also be a problem. You cared deeply about your patients. You held onto their stories and when patients died in surgery you had to process and grieve. You spoke about one surgery with a young boy who was shot in the head. You really thought the boy was strong enough to make it through the surgery and live but he did not make it. You cried on your car ride

³⁶ Ibid., 69.

³⁷ Ibid., 86.

home from work. I could tell from this story that you probably went through this process often. I do the same with my work even though it is not as intense. I dream about teaching. I think about my struggling students all the time and wonder how I can help them more. I wonder how I can make a difference in their lives and help them see the value in learning. I think this shows how much we care about the people we work with. It is important to look for a balance between caring too much and not enough. To keep up our stamina and a love for our work, we all need to find a balance and take care of ourselves too. Thank you for teaching me so much about life, death, and the search for meaning. I truly admire you.

Sincerely,

Mary

This book had me thinking, what would I choose to do with my time if I only had five years, one year, or one week to live. I came up with a couple of things I would want to do. I would meditate more and be more present in the moments I live. I would write more. I have learned to appreciate writing because it gives me time to process. I would write about things I believe in and I would write letters to my family and friends. I would certainly try to worry less if I knew I only had a short time left. I spend too much time planning, being worried, and stressing myself out. I would meditate to help with that. I do not know if I would continue teaching. Maybe I would stop teaching immediately and travel at first. I want to spend time on tropical beaches, hiking mountains, and riding my bike in beautiful places. I want to eat the best food in the world. But if I had five years

to live, I would go back to teaching and coaching. I like being surrounded by people and I would feel like I am wasting time if I did not coach or teach. Kalanithi states, “Human knowledge is not contained in one person. It grows from the relationships we create between each other and the world, and still it is never complete.”³⁸ I would like to keep connecting with students and athletes and sharing my knowledge and learning from them. I would spend some of my summer at camp like I always have because that is part of me. It gives me joy and peace to be at camp with my second family, on Lake Champlain, coaching gymnastics. Like the wild rose in Wendell Berry’s poem in the epilogue, sometimes our passions are hidden in the darkness and we forget about why we loved them in the first place. Then out of nowhere, they appear and we remember why we chose them in the first place.

4.4 Faith and Science

*The denial of our human finitude is impossible, no matter how much we want to run away from it, because all around us we get daily reminders of how ephemeral our lives can be.*³⁹

- Robert Nash

Although this section may seem like it is focused on my trepidations and affirmations about my choices in my teaching and coaching careers, this section is also about my daily reminders about my fears about life and my own finitude. Below, I am sharing with you my inner dialogue about life and death.

Where do we go when we die?

³⁸ Ibid., 172.

³⁹ Nash, and Viray. *How Stories Heal*, 35.

This is a question I often ask myself. My answers vary between reincarnation, going to heaven, and going somewhere out in the deep vast infinity of space. When I am feeling hopeful my answer is: we die and our ashes or rotting body becomes part of the soil and helps trees grow which in turn die and become new flowers or fields of grass. Our spirit gets recycled, like our body (or our matter), as someone else with a body and a new life.

When I am feeling pessimistic, my answer is: we never come back. Our body dies and our spirit dies with it. Out of the infinite time available in the ever-expanding universe, we were graced with an insignificant fraction of time to live. This makes me feel like there is lot of pressure on me to make the most of the short time I have. I must live every day with as much meaning and joy as I can manage. I think this is where my existentialism comes from. Robert Nash tells his students that embracing the words self, sole, am, and be is an act of faith. He says, “You cannot see them in an x-ray” but for some reason we all know that they exist. Is this how we are supposed to feel about death as well? It is my understanding that we cannot die and then come back to life, so do we have faith that there is something next?

When I am feeling desperate, I tell myself that I will go to heaven when I die. My spirit will go to heaven (I picture a gate in the clouds that leads me to a perfect world) where I can live with peace until it is time for the next phase of my existence. I imagine myself reconnecting with my beloved grandparents, deceased pets, and ancestors while waiting for my loved ones to join me. How do I know any of these scenarios are true? I will not know for sure until one of them comes true. At that point, I do not think I will

have the consciousness to know what is happening, yet I still think about these scenarios often.

A close friend and family member of mine is terminally ill. She was diagnosed with stage four cancer about nine months ago and she is expected to live for another year if her treatments continue to work. Every day I am reminded of the emotions that accompany a terminal illness. I switch between feeling confusion, sadness, grief, hope, gratitude, and love. I watch her son try to find a balance between taking care of her and building his own life. I hold back negative emotions when I am around him because I do not want to add even an ounce of negativity to his life. I wish that I could have more comfort in knowing that she will be somewhere waiting for us when she passes.

Listening to the news every morning on my drive to work reminds me of my finitude. When I hear about innocent teenagers dying in a car accident or people being shot to death at a concert that I very well could have been at, I feel the most helpless. I wrack my brain trying to find a way to get their lives back. I try to fill the void in my heart for these strangers by thinking of a way to help their families and communities. I also feel terrified for my own life. When I am in large crowds at the 4th of July fireworks, or large sporting events, I worry about the possibility of someone in the crowd having a gun and a different agenda than the rest of the innocent spectators. I think about all the death surrounding me and wonder: when will it be my time and will I be ready? Sometimes I tell myself to keep my mind in a safe bubble instead of letting it wander into all the scary unknowns and scenarios that I cannot control.

Processing my ideas about life and death makes me feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. The more I work on processing my own feelings, the more

emotionally available I can be for others when tough topics like these come up. I can be a steady listener without letting my emotions get in the way and I can share my insights in hopes of helping others gain clarity. I can tell others that it is okay to think about death. It is a natural part of our curiosity and if we ignore it, it will not just go away. If you dive into your curiosity and share your thoughts with others, you would not have to feel alone. Nash explained in the epigraph at the beginning of the chapter that we all experience some form of “existential anxiety”, which is essentially worry and unease about death. If we spend time thinking and processing our anxiety, it might not become part of our “universal state of being.”⁴⁰ This quote from Anne Lamott brings me comfort when I begin to worry. “It’s like singing on a boat during a terrible storm at sea. You cannot stop the raging storm, but singing can change the hearts and spirits of the people who are together on that ship.”⁴¹

In the teaching and coaching profession, we need our students to “be here” before they can learn. Thinking about our existential questions is one way to be present and live in the moment. My students and athletes have a life outside of the classroom and the gym. If I can recognize that I am battling with some existential fears I will be more compassionate to my students and athletes when they have a family member or friend pass away.

As a high school science teacher, I am always thinking with a scientific lens. I have been trained to believe that for anything to be true, there must be proof, or significant reasoning and explanation for something that is unable to be proven. I teach

⁴⁰ Nash, and Viray. *How Stories Heal*, 35.

⁴¹ Lamott. *Bird by Bird*, 327.

astronomy and this subject more than any other provokes thought about God, afterlife, and the concept of infinity. There are many theories that we discuss in astronomy class that have yet to be proven true, but we examine all the reasoning behind why scientists believe these ideas. For example, the Big Bang is only a theory. Yet, in the past couple decades, scientists have gathered data that aligns with the reasoning for the big bang. We look at maps of cosmic microwave background radiation that show the light that was created at the beginning of the universe. I have decided as a student to the subject of astronomy, I must have some faith in what I read and hear in order to believe it. All students might need some faith to believe it; we also must hold onto some doubt as well. If scientists did not hold onto some doubt, then they would not have the drive to continue searching for the proven truth.

I still have questions about God, and the afterlife that science cannot answer. Paul Kalanithi taught me that there is a gap between human passions and scientific data. Kalanithi says, “No system of thought can contain the fullness of human experience.”⁴² He clarified that science is the product of human hand, so therefore it cannot reach some permanent truth. I like science because it provides me with small truths that I can put together in my mind and make up my own set of values and beliefs.

In this chapter, “Coaching as a Vocation,” I processed my career choices and my finitude in life. I reflected on the type of coach and teacher I want to be and I also found that I am available to others in times of existential crises. I am available because I have thought about why I am here and how my career is an integral part of me. I have passion

⁴² Kalanithi, *When Breath Becomes Air*, 170.

for my job and I have learned that passion from the role models in my life, Ruth, Adam, and my parents. So, who is Mary Krug? I am a product of the people I surround myself with.

Chapter 5. Lessons from my Vocation

5.1 Listen

*Listening is Love.*⁴³

- Nancy Aronie

My third year of working at Dunkley's Gymnastics Camp was my first time working there for more than two weeks. During the summer of 2011, I lived in one of the cabins for the whole month of July. Over that month, I became more confident in my ability to take care of young teenage girls, to make them feel part of the cabin, and to help them have fun. There was one group of girls that really started to trust each other. One afternoon during rest time, they played a game where they had to share different facts or stories about themselves. One of the girls told the rest of the cabin that her dad was in jail.

Later that evening, the girls brought it up again. I was in the cabin and sat and listened with the rest of the girls while Tori told her story about her dad. She talked for over an hour about her childhood and the events that led to the tragic death of her cousin. Her dad was put in jail because he was guilty of murder. Tori shared with us all the details that she knew about the story and she told us about her life after her dad went to jail. She was very sad and confused when her dad was first convicted. For her whole life she knew her dad to be a good person who she loved. When she found out about her cousin's death, Tori was shocked. She told us how she tried to cope with the trauma and how she eventually got back to being the happy fun-loving person she was.

⁴³ Aronie, *Writing from the Heart*, 55.

That night after I tucked the girls into bed and said my goodnights I went to find Ruth, the owner of camp. I told her about Tori and asked for advice on how to support the girls. I also processed some of my feeling about the story. I had never heard someone share such a traumatic experience and I was feeling a little bit of shock. I was inspired by Tori's strength. I could not comprehend the sadness that she must have felt. I was grateful that she shared her story and found support in her new friends. Ruth told me I handled the situation well and I should spend extra time in the cabin and stay alert in case any of the girls get upset and need to talk. That week I spent all my down time in the cabin. The girls continued to support each other and their friendships grew. My bond with Tori grew as well. She talked to me more about her family and chose to spend time with me when given the opportunity during the days that week at camp.

The experience I had with Tori and her cabin helped me realize that making connections with the campers is the most important part of our job at camp. It is also the most important part of being a coach and a teacher. It is our job to help kids learn, grow, and make friends. As soon as campers, students, and athletes begin to trust us, we can learn a lot about their lives. We become someone who they can go to for help, support, and a listening ear. I learned from Tori that I know how to create a safe space. I helped her feel comfortable enough to share her deepest secrets. I was Tori's counselor for a few more years before she stopped coming to camp. I have seen her a couple of times since she stopped being a camper and it has been very comforting to know she is growing up into a smart, caring, and strong young woman.

In high school sports and in the classroom creating a safe environment is vital to the wellbeing of the team and class. Setting up a community of trust enables the kids to

feel safe and welcome. One way to build trust is being a good listener. Many times, people look like they have everything together but, on the inside, they are not okay. Being there to listen to their story can make a difference for them.

5.2 Structure

In putting together your standards, remember that it is essential to involve your entire team. Standards are not rules issued by the boss; they are a collective identity. Remember, standards are the things that you do all the time and the things for which you hold one another accountable.⁴⁴

- Mike Krzyzewski, (Duke Men's Basketball Coach)

The bell rings for my last biology class of the day. The students enter the room with energy. A few students walk in late with no pass or explanation for why they are late. In the first couple minutes of class I give the first instruction to the students and repeat it about three times because the students are either late or not paying attention.

After the instructions are clear I walk over to my student named Hayley and ask her, "Do you remember the conversation we had last class? I am going to have you sit in your new assigned seat today."

She says, "Yes, I remember, but can I sit with Mrs. M (the classroom teaching assistant) instead?"

I compromise by asking, "Could you start class in your assigned seat for the instructions and then you can move to sit with Mrs. M when we start working?"

⁴⁴ Mike Krzyzewski and Jamie K. Spatola, *The Gold Standard: Building a World-Class Team* (New York, NY: Business Plus, 2010), 10.

She agrees. After the students get settled with their materials out and ready, I give the directions and goal for the day as well as the outline of activities for the week. I let the students know they can begin work and I ask them to remain in their assigned seats so we can have a productive class. Hayley, who I talked to at the beginning of class, moves to sit with her friend who is also choosing not to sit in her assigned seat.

I ask them “please find your correct seats.” Then I notice that three students already have their hands up with questions for me so I bounce around the classroom to help those students.

Next, I make my way back to the group of students who are still sitting in the wrong seats and socializing with each other. I ask them politely, “You seem to be distracting each other from work, could you find your way back to your assigned seats please?”

One student says yes.

Hayley replied, “We are helping each other though. We will stay productive.”

I leave them because I see that a couple of other students need help staying focused. Then I hear the same group of students start to distract the rest of the class. This time, I tell them, “Your seating arrangement is not working. It is time to separate. Please move back to your assigned seats.”

Hayley responds, “Ms. Krug, we are working. Let me just finish this sentence.” I wait a couple of seconds, and she remains seated.

I ask, “Please move to sit with Mrs. M.”

“Hold on,” she replies.

Last class we had a similar conversation that resulted in Hayley becoming more and more stubborn. Mrs. M had to get an administrator to walk her out of the classroom. The administrator talked to her for about twenty minutes and told me that Hayley will be willing to move her seat next time I ask her to.

I reminded Hayley of that conversation and I told her, “I really want you to stay in class today. Please cooperate and move to your assigned seat.”

She stayed put.

I gave her one more chance to get up, and she did not budge. Mrs. M left to get an administrator.

I spent the eighty-minute biology class managing classroom behavior. There was no more than a couple of minutes of quality teaching and learning during that class. The students who were doing their work did not get my prompt in-class feedback and the students who were not doing their work got most of my attention. I left school feeling frustrated, disrespected, and tired. These feelings do not make me eager to go back to work.

I tell this story because I know I am not the only teacher who has been in this position of having a hard time balancing the needs of each student with the overall needs of the class. I want to be available to help each of my students and I also want my classroom to be a place where students are safe to learn and free of distractions. I think the solution to this classroom management problem is creating small connections and relationships with the students while enforcing rules, expectations, structure, and follow-through.

Hayley is a student who shows signs of insecurity. She would not be described by her peers as the prettiest or the smartest girl in the class. She comes from a poor family and does not get a lot of support from her parents. She seeks the approval of her classmates and wants to be liked by the other girls in the class. She jumps on the opportunity to help her friend with her work. When I asked Hayley to do something different from the rest of the class she felt angry because she did not want to be singled out. She showed her classmates that she is tough by acting stubborn and refusing to take directions from me. These qualities led me to believe that she needs to have a good relationship with her teachers if she is going to cooperate. At the beginning of the school year, the two of us did not have a good relationship. I needed to follow the wisdom of John Wooden, “You must be interested in finding the best way, not in having your own way.”⁴⁵ I needed to find a way to work with her where she is comfortable.

Two days later, I sat down with the assistant principal who had been talking to Hayley when she left my class. We came up with a plan and then had a meeting with Hayley. The two of us were on the same page going into the meeting and it went very well. We set up some norms with Hayley so she could expect when I might ask her to change the way she is behaving. We talked about how her actions made it difficult for me to run a smooth classroom. We also recognized her feeling about wanting to do well in my class and be liked by her classmates. She was cooperative and positive in the meeting. Principal H told Hayley that he enjoys talking to her and wants her to stop by

⁴⁵ Wooden, *A Lifetime of Observations*, 19.

his office to have coffee or hot chocolate with him. He does not want to have to see her because she is being asked to leave a classroom.

From that meeting on, Hayley has been a great classmate and a respectful student. She has been doing her work and staying focused while finding time to take small breaks to help her friend. The next couple classes after our meeting, Hayley sat and worked for about thirty minutes and then asked me if she could go visit Mr. H. I allowed her to go both times because I wanted her to know I supported her. She was proud to get to visit the principal on good terms, just to say “Hi!” to him.

The same story could be told from a coach’s standpoint with an athlete. I have worked with some amazing coaches who hold strict rules and expectations and I have worked with some coaches who do not. I have seen the differences in the way the athletes behave and train. Being a teacher and a head coach is a lot of responsibility. Setting rules and expectations from the beginning lets the athletes know what is appropriate and what is not. Creating a connection with each athlete and making sure they feel like a part of the community helps you hold them accountable. When it comes time to give athletes feedback, it is important that I have already built a relationship with them and they trust me. Some coaches yell at their athletes and tell them they are not good enough. I do not believe in this model of feedback. Positivity will inspire and negativity will bring the team down. In the story above, I showed compassion, empathy, and connection with the student. She changed because I was not angry, or dismissive. These are qualities that I need to remind myself of as a coach and a teacher. Holding the athletes accountable to the team’s expectations takes effort, consistency, kindness, and a willingness to confront unacceptable behaviors in a level-headed manner. I will try to

live up to my own advice. Sometimes putting in the effort at the beginning of the season helps your team run smoothly at the end of the season when the stakes are the highest.

5.3 Composure

*Tame your passions before making important decisions: good judgement is most likely to occur when the head is cool, the body is rested, and the stomach is full.*⁴⁶

- Norman Rosenthal

The last time I cried at work, I was sitting alone in my classroom after an end of the season sports banquet. About twenty minutes prior, a mother of an athlete was standing in my face telling me I was an awful person. I was just about finished my first year of teaching at a small rural Vermont school. The school year and track season were both over and it was the last time I would be in the school building before moving back to my hometown for a new teaching job. It was the night of the spring sports banquet. All the spring sports teams gathered in the court yard in the middle of the school for dinner and then each of the sports teams split up into separate classrooms for the more intimate portion of the banquet. For this portion of the night, the coaches recognized the athletes for their accomplishments and gave out individual awards. The team members, parents, and coaches were all gathered in the science classroom where I taught. We had a great evening and everyone seemed to be in good spirits about the end of the year. The banquet was ending and many athletes and parents were lingering in the classroom to chat and say their goodbyes.

⁴⁶ Rosenthal, *The Gift of Adversity*, 107.

I was standing in the front of the classroom while the other two coaches were close by, but not in earshot of the conversation that started. A mother came up to me and began by telling me that I had ruined her daughter's track career. Her daughter had battled with injuries throughout all four years of high school and her former coach had helped her find a love in running and participating in track. This mother told me that I took her love for the sport away. She expressed that she did not want to embarrass her daughter, but she came to the banquet because her daughter was too hurt to attend herself. She told me that she was not planning on addressing me, but she could not let me leave without letting me know the pain I caused her daughter. I stood there in front of her in disbelief and could not manage a response. At that moment the most ironic thing began to happen. A couple of students started singing "Happy Birthday" and soon the whole room had joined in. They were singing to me. My emotions were in a heightened state of conflict.

Earlier in the school year a couple of students thought it would be funny to try to derail class by singing the "Happy Birthday" song to me, when it was not my birthday, because they thought it would be funny to embarrass me and see what kind of reaction they would get. My face turned bright red and I could not hide my embarrassment. Soon it turned into an inside joke in the classroom. On my real birthday, in May, the students from my class were also on the track team and they all conspired to throw me a surprise party in the middle of the school day. The other track coach bought a cake and then let all the students into my classroom while I was out eating lunch. She came to get me in the middle of lunch and told me she had to talk to me in private in my classroom. When we opened the door, the team jumped up out of hiding to surprise me with a cake and a

“real” Happy Birthday celebration. In that moment at the end of the track banquet, someone started singing out of tradition. The athletes appreciated my work with them and wanted to show me they cared by singing.

In the chaos, one of the other track coaches noticed the mother who was angrily awaiting my response. The coach walked with the mother out of the classroom and stood with her in the parking lot letting her vent to him. I was able to say goodbye to my athletes and their parents without a big blow up. Later that evening, the other coach found me to give me a hug and tell me that it was not my fault that the mother was angry. He knew her and her family and told me that she was overly protective of her kids to a fault. She could not see the truth through all the emotions her daughter displayed. She did not come to the school looking to get a straight answer or see a different perspective. It was not worth it to try to reason with her. She wanted me to feel bad and she was not going to accept a different outcome.

After everyone left the school, I was alone in my classroom and I started to cry. I sobbed for a long time. The hardest year of my life had come to an end with a bang. I survived my first year of teaching. I survived living in the middle of nowhere away from my family and friends. I survived my break up with my boyfriend of six years. I left that town a much stronger person that I was when I arrived. I sobbed because I was frustrated. I was caught in an ironic state of being. I was sad to leave the community that was my family for a year, but in truth, I was very excited to return to my hometown. I was mad that anyone could judge me so wrongly without taking a moment to meet me and see that I am a kind, compassionate person who could never maliciously hurt someone else’s love for a sport. I was angry that I could not defend myself to that

mother. That evening, I learned to grow some thicker skin. I learned that no matter how hard I try to be a good person, I cannot control what other people think of me. I also learned that if I ever have another conversation with a parent that starts to go downhill, I will know how to handle it. I will stop them abruptly and with a hint of a smile on my face, I will tell them that I would like to continue the conversation with an administrator present (while the song Happy Birthday rings through my mind). I have learned that I will not allow myself to be physically or emotionally “cornered” by another person.

I relived this story as I wrote it. Nancy Aronie says, “Choosing to re-see gives me the chance to retrieve what was lost; to gain the ability to re-envision.”⁴⁷ This time I lived this story with pride and strength instead of shame and weakness. I encourage anyone who has a story that they cannot let go of, to write it. I felt shameful about that moment for years. I was disappointed that I allowed a student to harbor feelings for so long without sharing them with me. Even though I knew the mother was acting overly protective, it was hard not to take it to heart. I feel like an awful person after hearing her say that I was. I was sad that the student did not find me a trustworthy person whom she could talk to. Now that I am separated from this moment with time, distance, and growth, I can look back on it with pride because I did not let the mother’s words stop me from teaching and coaching. I grew stronger from this experience. I taught myself to always think of how my actions are affecting everyone around me. I may think that I am doing the right thing and being a good leader, but not everyone will have the same perspective as me. I am proud of myself for standing my ground that night and feeling

⁴⁷ Aronie, *Writing from the Heart*, 38.

the love from the rest of my track team. I did not break down in that moment. I did not yell back at her or try to defend myself. I took her hurtful words and acknowledged them, and then let them roll off my back.

Anyone who works in education or any other human services field will experience situations where their emotions will want to take over their rational thinking. If we can embrace Norman Rosenthal's word of wisdom to tame our passions before making important decisions then we will be thankful for our level headedness and good judgement.

5.4 Change

*Everyone who got to where they are had to begin where they were.*⁴⁸

- Richard Paul Evans (American Author)

During my first couple years of teaching I spent all my energy trying to prove myself as a good teacher. I was constantly worried about having a plan for the day and knowing the content. I felt like I was pretending to be a teacher. When I went to work I was afraid that someone would find out I was a fraud. Of course, I was qualified and I was hired by people who trusted that I could do the job, but I still felt like I was faking it.

I wanted to prove myself so badly that sometimes I overlooked the importance of other areas of my job. For example, one of my chemistry students, Jake, was failing the course after the first couple of weeks of school. Instead of helping him understand his responsibilities, I bent over backwards trying to give him second and third chances to

⁴⁸ Robert Nash, and Jennifer J.J. Jang. *Preparing Students for Life Beyond College: A Meaning Centered Vision for Holistic Teaching and Learning*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 130.

improve. Jake came to class late, he used his cell-phone to text and make phone calls in class, he disrupted the lessons by interrupting me and other students, and showed little to no motivation to learn chemistry. When Jake skipped my class, I would take time out of my preparation block to help him get caught up on his missing work. I tried harder to help him, more than he was trying to succeed. I wanted to show him that I was a caring teacher who was there to help him. I gave him second chances to get help with his work, even though he chose to skip my class because I wanted to show him that I would not give up on him. Most importantly I wanted to be the teacher that could get through to this student when others could not. I wanted to show other teachers that I was a good teacher because I could help this troubled student succeed. Jake's math teacher showed little patience for him. When I saw the math teacher in the copy room I remember him venting to me about how frustrating the student was. This math teacher eventually kicked Jake out of the math class because he refused to teach someone who was so disrespectful. When I heard these stories, I felt like I was doing the right thing. I wanted to be more compassionate to this student because I knew other teachers did not have the patience for him. In the process, I hindered the learning of the rest of the class while I let Jake stay in the class.

I currently have students who are similar to Jake in many ways, but I have changed. I realize now that I am not doing the students any favors by working harder than they are in order to help them succeed. When a student chooses to skip all or part of my class, I do not go out of my way to help them catch up. I ask them to come see me if they need help, but I do not bend over backwards finding ways to help them. I ask my students who show little interest in doing their schoolwork how I can get them motivated.

I try to help the students see the value in their education by talking to them about their goals and their life in general. I have realized that I cannot change their actions, I can only help them see for themselves what they need to do.

One way that I have realized that I have changed is that I am not as focused on becoming a good teacher. I am focused more on how to be the best support to my students. I still work hard to be the best teacher I can be but I do not dwell upon worrying what others think. I came to this realization of change over the course of a couple of different interactions. The first was with a special education teacher at my school. At the beginning of the school year she told me that she was glad one of her students was going to have me as a teacher. She said that she thought I was a great teacher and she enjoyed working with me. This made me feel proud. Having someone else tell me that I am doing a good job gave me confidence to start off the school year. It helped me realize that I am a good teacher and I do not have to worry so much about planning the best lessons or impressing my more experienced colleagues.

Another moment this year that stuck out to me was when one of my students told me she appreciated me going out of my way to help schedule her for advisory, even though I was not her advisory teacher. I told her it is my job to help students with their academics even if it does not relate to science and even if I am not their advisory teacher. She told me that a lot of her teachers would not go out of their way to help her and she appreciated my help. Again, this interaction helped me realize that I am doing a good job being available to my students.

A third interaction solidified my belief that I have changed. Every Monday the students go to their Advisors to be scheduled with different teachers throughout the week.

Every day the students have something called flex block for thirty minutes and it gives them a chance to go see any teacher and get extra help. I was sitting in my flex block room when two of my biology students walked in. One of them asked me with a rude tone in his voice, “Why did you schedule me for flex today?”

I told him, “You are missing an assignment so you can spend this time making it up.”

He responded with an annoyed look on his face, “Well I was absent yesterday that’s why it’s missing.”

I said, “You’re right, that’s why I was proactive and scheduled you to come in. There are Chrome-books on the shelf over there, you can grab one and get to work.”

In the past, I would have been nicer to the student even though he was trying to get out of doing work and acting like I unjustifiably scheduled him to come in and make up work. Now, I have learned to be direct with the students and call them out when they are being rude or manipulative.

Change is an interesting concept. It sneaks up on you when you do not even notice. Sometimes it takes the perspectives of others to help you realize that you have changed. When I first met my partner, Roy, almost two years ago, he heard me talk about teaching differently than I do now. He has noticed that I come home from work telling different types of stories about my job. He has noticed my shift in worrying about how I am doing at my job to worrying more about how I can help the students who need it. The three examples I shared are another way that an outsider’s perspective of me has helped me realize that I have changed.

At the start of last summer, Roy and I went on a bike ride. We rode down the Burlington Bike Path and across most of the Causeway that connects Colchester to the island of South Hero. While we were riding, I was thinking about the track practice I had coached that morning. I reflected on my mood and how I was more present that day. I had made conversation with kids on the track team that I did not usually interact with. I reminded myself that I coach and teach because I enjoy the small interactions I have with kids. Next, I reminded myself to be present in the moment I was having. I looked out over the lake and took in a deep breath of air. It was a warm sunny afternoon and I was with my favorite person getting exercise. What more could I ask for?

We pulled over at a wide section of the path to rest and take in the scenery. We sat on a rock, looked out at the mountains and watched a fishing boat off in the distance. Roy asked me, “What are you the best at?”

I tried to think of my best quality or best skill. It was hard. I thought of saying, I am best at gymnastics! I caught myself. I have not done gymnastics in years. What about pole vault? Nope, I do not compete in pole vault anymore. Okay, am I the best at being a teacher and a coach? No, I am still learning and growing into a wise experienced teacher.

I asked Roy, “What do you think you’re the best at?”

He said, “I think I am really good at giving people sound advice when they come to me with a problem.”

That got me thinking a little differently. Maybe my best quality is that I am good at making others feel welcome.

I told that to Roy and then followed up with, “I wish I had my own hobby that I stuck with. I wish I could say I am the best at doing yoga or mountain biking, but I do not stick to those hobbies. I do not make them part of my weekly routine.”

We talked about things we both wanted to change about ourselves and reflected on the fact that change is hard.

Sometimes I feel unfulfilled in my life. It sounds crazy because I have so many things that I am involved with that I should not feel that way. I think even though I am busy and involved, I do not have an outlet for my competitive nature. I take it out in my work by competing with myself to be best worker. I need to fill the competitive void by doing something that is just for me. I need to start making myself a priority.

I have changed from a student-athlete to an overachieving teacher who cares deeply about her job, and now my goal for the next phase of my life is to find some work-life balance. I do not want my job to define me and I want to make boundaries for myself. I will find a balance between being an athlete, teacher, coach, partner, and friend.

5.5 Lessons for Teachers

*I do not know what your destiny will be, but one thing I do know the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought, and found how, to serve others.*⁴⁹

-Albert Schweitzer (French-German Theologian and Humanitarian)

Teachers at all levels of education from elementary school to higher education value the opportunity to teach, yet sometimes they need support, encouragement, and

⁴⁹ Nash and Jang. *Preparing Students for Life Beyond College*, 121.

practical tips when challenges grow more difficult for them. I will provide some tips and encouragement as a way to wrap up the different themes in my thesis.

- The State Meet: I wrote this story to give my readers some context about who I am and where I come from. I bring this narrative with me through my life. Every gymnast who competed in the state meet that day has their own story that they took away and they might carry with them through life. There may be experiences in your life that shaped you that you want to share. I wanted to share my story because it shows my love for the sport of gymnastics.
- Team: On the Essex Gymnastics team, the success of the team comes before the success of each individual. The team is a family and the gymnasts care about each other. They put in effort at the beginning of each season to connect and become a close group. Teams are built in different context of life. As challenges arise in our work with kids, it is easier to face those challenges knowing you have a strong team. Your classroom community and your colleagues are your team. If you have a strong team, you will not have to face tough challenges alone.
- Communication: If you want your classroom to be a productive community, the first step to building a community is through communication. If the teacher communicates her expectations about learning to the students, it keeps them accountable for producing high quality work. If the students communicate their goals and intentions with an assignment, it keeps them honest. Whenever there is a misunderstanding, an honest and respectful conversation helps to clear everything up. Communication is a key to building strong healthy relationships.

- Trust: If students do not trust their teacher, it becomes very challenging for them to open up to learn in the classroom. Trust is hard to earn and easy to lose. Teachers need to be mindful of what they say to students and how their body language comes across. If a student misunderstands feedback, it will take time to re-earn their trust.
- Grit: My grit came from passion and having the necessary support to be successful. I was passionate about my sports, and I had supportive family members, coaches, and teammates who helped me be successful. I had goals for myself and I remembered those goals when I was tired and felt like taking a break. I pushed myself in school, practices, and at home to do the best work I could because I wanted the best for myself. If teachers can help their students find their passions and give them the support they need, students will have an easier time being gritty and persisting when challenges arise.
- Belonging: Once teachers establish trust and open communication, students begin to feel like they belong in the classroom or group. Taking short moments to be kind to kids and help them feel welcome goes a long way. I feel like I belong in the classroom and in the gym or on the track when my students and athletes start to get to know me and begin asking me for help. I feel like I am valued and needed in the group and that makes me feel like I belong. We need to support our students to feel valued and needed in the classroom.
- Perfectionism: It is impossible to leave a day of work feeling like you have done everything you could do. There are always more plans to make, more grading to complete, and different students to worry about. Teachers should not strive to be

- perfect because there is no such thing as a perfect teacher. Learning is messy because students are not perfect either. Students learn at different paces and in different ways.
- Fun: If you do not have fun at your job then what gets you up in the morning? The students will not have fun with their learning if you are not having fun teaching them.
 - Connectivity: Who are your role models and your educational ancestors? If you want to know where you are going, it is important to take a step back and recognize where you are coming from. If you want to inspire, think about the people in your life who have inspired you.
 - Why Teach? The same arguments that I made for coaching could be made for teaching. When my athletes carry themselves with class and dignity it makes me feel proud and rewarded for my work with them. When I have a bad day at school, sometimes it helps to look through old “thank you” cards, model student work, and remember my students’ success stories. Our work does not come with day to day pay offs so when we start to feel burnt out or unmotivated, thinking about our positive moments with students can help get our spirits up.
 - A Calling: Life is short so try to live each day in the present and find little things that bring you joy. Be grateful for what you have.
 - Faith and Science: Many of our students face the reality of death at some point while they are in school, whether it is the death of a family member, a friend, a teacher, a community member, or a horrific news story. Some students battle with depression and suicidal thoughts. Teachers need to be emotionally available for students so we can comfort them when they are not emotionally available to learn. In order to be

emotionally available, we need to process grief, and face our own existential fears and anxieties.

- Listen: We all want to be heard. The best way to show your love is by being a good listener. Listening with an open mind and truly hearing what the other person has to say before giving advice takes patience and practice, but it can be very helpful for the person who needs to tell their story.
- Structure: Being a teacher is a lot of responsibility. Setting rules and expectations at the beginning of the year helps the students understand what is appropriate and what is not. Enforcing the rules and expectations consistently and fairly keeps a safe and productive learning environment in the classroom.
- Composure: Teachers occasionally experience situations where it is tough to keep their emotions at rest when they need to be professional. I find that it helps to take a deep breath before speaking. If you are addressing an angry phone call or email, wait a day to respond so your emotions do not show through in your response. Also, remember that you are not alone at work. Sometimes asking a colleague for help is better than trying to face a situation alone.
- Change: Education is full of change. Successful teachers embrace change and roll with the tides of change. It can sneak up on you when you are not expecting it, or it can happen all at once. Do not resist change, it helps you grow.

This thesis does not have a central problem that I tried to fix, or a specific question that I wanted to answer. My thesis is simply a compilation of stories that all connect to one theme, which is the importance of making connections. I want my readers to witness my writing process and see that I have done a substantial amount of reflecting.

I have come up with many take away lessons for myself through my writing. I have grown and I have learned more about myself. I want my thesis to be a model for anyone else who is overdue for some introspection and reflection.

In the article, “Spirituality in the Academy: Reclaiming from the Margins and Evoking a Transformative Way of Knowing the World” by Riyad Ahmed Shahjahan (2005), I read a couple of definitions of spirituality that resonated with the theme of my thesis. Parker Palmer defined spirituality as “the ancient and abiding human quest for connectedness with something larger and more trustworthy than our egos.”⁵⁰ This definition is universal because anything can be larger and more trustworthy than our own ego. We can strive to connect with a larger group of people, science, god, or anything else that makes us feel whole. Malidoma Some pointed out:

Each one of us possessed a center that he/she had grown away from at birth... The center is both within and without. It is everywhere. But we must realize it exists, find it and be with it, for without it, the center we cannot tell who we are, where we come from, and where we are going.⁵¹

This quote feels very universalizable because I think most humans want to be connected to their center/core/spirit. If we go about life without bringing ourselves along with us, then we feel lost, disconnected, and meaningless. Finding our center can be hard.

Everyone has a different interpretation of what their center is and if they have found it. I feel connected to my center when I am practicing yoga, taking a mindful moment to breathe, and doing SPN writing. I feel more whole when I am taking time to listen to my body and my breath. I feel like I have done some healing after writing an SPN story.

⁵⁰ Riyad Ahmed Shahjahan. "Spirituality in the Academy: Reclaiming from the margins and evoking a transformative way of knowing the world." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 18, no. 6 (2005): 688.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 688.

The process of writing my thesis about making connections through coaching a teaching has been therapeutic for me. I have realized my growth and explored what helps me feel connected to my center. Now I have a better sense of who I am. I feel more confident in my ability to teach kids content, skills, and life lessons. I hope my readers can reflect on their vocation and find it equally as meaningful.

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