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A Midlife Educator's Story Of Change: How Learning To Live For Compassion, Meaning And Leadership Transformed Me

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A MIDLIFE EDUCATOR'S STORY OF CHANGE: HOW LEARNING
TO LIVE FOR COMPASSION, MEANING AND LEADERSHIP
TRANSFORMED ME

A Thesis Presented

by

Alan Shashok

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Education
Specializing in Interdisciplinary Studies

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Abstract

What are a person's core beliefs? What do they hold dear and to be true? How does one go about examining their ideals and challenging them risking discovering there is a different way of living, thinking, or showing up? These questions and more are what drove me to enroll in the University of Vermont Graduate College and the Interdisciplinary Studies (IDS) program. I probably could have attended a few self-help seminars, paid a life coach or seen some type of counselor to help me explore these issues. Doing the exploring via higher education and the IDS program seemed much more meaningful, especially as the program progressed.

Through Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) I have been able to closely examine myself, my life stories, with a different lens, even different then using the advantage of hindsight, in hopes of finding a path toward different self-realization. Important to note I said different, not better, as each person's experience is valid, something you will see as you read the thesis. In so doing, you will be exposed to three basic explorations, my personal stories, my professional stories, and my political stories. All intertwine and relate to each other, but each have their own narrative to contribute to this journey. By the end, you, as the reader and consumer of these stories, may find similar paths to search for yourself in whatever place you currently find your life.

Dedication

To Susan, my wife, without whom these stories would have very different meaning.

Your spirit and soul touch every word written. Your gifts of time, wisdom, heart and love will continue to be unwrapped long after this tome has been set on a shelf.

In your eyes
The light the heat
In your eyes
I am complete
In your eyes
I see the doorway to a thousand churches
In your eyes
The resolution of all the fruitless searches
In your eyes
I see the light and the heat
In your eyes
Oh, I want to be that complete
I want to touch the light
The heat I see in your eyes
- Peter Gabriel, "In Your Eyes"

Acknowledgements

Where to begin, there are so many people that have contributed to this journey, it would be hard to not leave some out. I'll start with all the fantastic class mates over the past three years including Angela, Michael, Romana, Greer, Sarah, Cody, Barrie, Kathleen, and Claire just to highlight a few. You all have been inspirational in your ethic, vulnerability and non-judgmental approach to our studies and stories.

Next, the group of people that I interviewed for various classes including Glenn, Tam, Linda, Sarah, Susan and Jennifer, without whom I would not have been able to examine my own leadership qualities through an objective lens.

It goes without saying, Robert Nash and Jennifer Jang have played a tremendous role in setting the stage for reflection and self-discovery. I don't think I would have had the courage to dive deep if not for their example.

Lastly, my family, Nikolas and Alexander, my two sons who have been supportive and patient with me as family time was replaced with study and writing time. My wife Susan, who encouraged me, kicked my butt from time to time and kept me focused through the last three years, and through our whole life together, thank you so very much.

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Introduction

“I don’t like people”, you blurted out. What were you thinking? This is a good way to introduce yourself to class. It had been over thirty years since you had been in an academic classroom. You thought the time was ripe to test those waters again. Since beginning employment at The University of Vermont about two years earlier, you had taken advantage of many professional development opportunities regarding race, religion, gender identity and leadership. However, you sought something more in depth than sitting through a seminar with little or no opportunity for give and take, and rare chances to use and share what was covered during those few hours. Having thought about an advanced degree about ten years prior, you knew some day you would actually be able to get it done.

You met with Robert Nash, your potential advisor and Interdisciplinary Degree Studies program head. He asked very pointed questions about yourself, your motivation and ability to work independently. It was clear he was not going to be there to hold your hand along the way. He would erect a few sign posts here and there if you strayed too far. He recommended to test the waters in one of his classes, Philosophy of Education, was coming up in the fall and one of the required courses in the program, so you enrolled as a continuing education student, still not sure how you, a fifty plus year old would meld with a bunch of 20 something’s. Could you do the work required of a graduate student? Your undergrad work 30 years earlier was nothing to write home about. What sideways looks might you get that first day of class from the other students? Were you going to have to “share” in class? With these insecurities and hesitations, you decided to tell

everyone there, you already don't like them, this will surely make the process that much better.

You found it really didn't matter after all. There were many people in that class like you, a few older, some a bit younger, and some very much younger, all with their own motivations and pursuits for something not yet found. As the semester wore on, it seemed you had found a home. You were gaining more confidence, more meaning, and even learned to accept a few of the people you shared the fifteen weeks with. Ultimately you chose to continue and enrolled in the Graduate College and the IDS program the following semester. The only bed rock goal was to learn; learn about yourself and others. Share your stories and hear theirs. Find a path to compassion, meaning and leadership and offer that path to others that seek some of the same answers as yourself.

Why Scholarly Personal Narrative?

Do you have a bicycle hanging in your garage you purchased several years ago with every intent on getting out on it for exercise, health and being with your family? Maybe you have some bright shiny new tools sitting in a tool box or your garage shelf all ready to take on that house project that has been waning for years and years. Is there a new process you would like to introduce at work, maybe rewrite a syllabus to be more inclusive, or a procedural change to improve your work? All of these have some type of back story that goes along with them. The, “What, So what, Now what?, approach, a centerpiece to Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) writing or, for that matter, any other endeavor you may face. You have the means, but something is holding you back like trying to run in a dream.

I was first exposed to SPN writing in my very first course back into academia, Philosophy of Education with Robert Nash. SPN is a style of writing that Professor Nash has developed over the years. It allows the writer to tell their story in universalizable terms. I knew authoring a thesis was an option to completion of the Interdisciplinary Studies Master’s program, but that end point was several years away. I could not see myself capable of concocting 20,000 words out of whole cloth, nor did I have any sense I had a story worth telling or being listened to.

One of our very first assignments for the class was to write and submit a learning contract to Professor Nash and his co-facilitator, Jennifer Jang. It was intended to be a commitment to the course, what we hoped to glean from the material and classmates, as well as a commitment to ourselves to keep on task for the semester. When

we were told the contract needed to be at least 200 words, I had the deepest sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach, exactly the feeling you get as you crest the highest point on a roller coaster, only this did not sound like fun. There was nothing in me to help convince myself 200 words were possible. So, as I would often do in those cases, I put it off, kept my butt out of the seat and ruminated about how it was not possible. Finally, the time came, the day before it was due. Sitting down, somehow within an hour or less, 600 or more words came flooding out of my head and fingers. Professor Nash had said to those of us who were not as academically inclined at that point it would not be as hard as we might think. This was the first instance, in a very long time, I felt my voice mattered. A central subject to my studies was to find my voice, so it seemed I was well on my way. “We tell our stories to prove that we’ve lived, that we’re still alive, and that we intend to live into some unknown future.”¹ I would find this theme pertinent throughout my studies. I also discovered another term for it about two years later called “Harvesting” your life. You’ll learn more about that later in Chapter 1.

I successfully completed this first class with Professor Nash. With new found vigor and assurance, I went on to take additional classes with Professor Nash and other courses more topic specific like Organizational Development & Change, or Leadership In Practice, to name a couple, I found SPN writing suited these subjects very well. I was able to incorporate my experiences, feelings, surroundings and knowledge into writing that brought a different level of understanding to my classes, professors, and myself.

¹ Robert Nash and Sydney Viray, *How Stories Heal: Writing Our Way To Meaning & Wholness In The Academy* (New York: Peter Land Publishing, 2014).

SPN opened up an inner reflection I did not think existed within me, let alone in academia.

My studies were to focus on leadership, change and organization, but underneath all of that was the theme of self-consideration. How, what and why do I believe, think and do the things I do? If I were to pursue a thesis, SPN would fit the bill very well. SPN will allow me space to scrutinize these questions and more, in a meaningful way.

I will be riding my bike when the weather warms up. I will be looking at any training development or meetings I run with a new appreciation for stories and space to allow that. SPN has offered me the means to use all the tools I have gathered over the years and put them to use so they don't rust in the corner of the basement.

I hope you will join me in my stories, that they will become part of you, and in some way, I become part of your stories and lives. This is precisely why SPN, for me, is a perfect venue to let my stories “squeak” in all their splendor, to narrate them with pride and enthusiasm to inspire and help others.²

² Robert Nash and DeMethra LaSha Bradley, *Me-Search and Re-Search: A Guide for Writing Scholarly Personal Narrative* (Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, 2011).

CHAPTER 1: PERSONAL STORIES

1.1. Unspoken Gifts

From father to son
In one life has begun
A work that's never done
Father to son
- Bono and The Edge, "Dirty Day"

What does a parent pass along to their offspring? How do these "gifts" translate into how one leads their life? Do these life lessons evolve, mutate, twist, and turn over a life consciously, unconsciously, or not at all? What did my father give to me that I have kept all these years, and passed to my sons?

My Dad, Paul, was born the middle son of three on July 18, 1918 to Harry and Mary Chashsek, (Somewhere along the line, this was Americanized to be Shashok) in Willimantic, Connecticut, a small factory town in the northeastern part of the state. Mary and Harry escaped Russia just before the Russian revolution. There has been debate among older family members and some older acquaintances of the family that they were Polish, given they came from Minsk the modern-day capital of Belarus. Borders in Eastern Europe were pretty fluid in those days so who really is to say. I prefer to think of myself as half Russian. It sounds more romantic and intriguing than claiming to be half Polish.

By my observations, Dad was never an emotionally expressive person. Russians tend to be stoic in their public conduct. This stoicism spilled over into our family life as well. While there were some smiles of happiness and joy, outward exhibitions of love, caring, nurturing, and sharing were very few and far between, even with my mother,

Phyllis. Being as I was the last of four children, with fourteen years between the first and last born, it may very well have been my mom and dad were just done with the whole experiment by the time I decided to make my presence in the world known. Perceptible displays of love and caring were generally not part of our household among anyone. Sure, we celebrated birthdays, Christmas, and other traditional occasions. The in-between times were absent of these demonstrations of closeness and feelings. The lack of outward expression was likely a contributing factor to my parents' divorce about thirteen years after I came along. With little show of affection or compassion, how did I know my father had any feelings or affection for me to any degree? After all, he ended up leaving my mother and I alone eventually, the rest of my siblings having long since escaped the household. Stoicism itself does not necessarily mean a person is devoid of emotion and caring. I too exhibit some of these same stoic traits. Did this quality show itself in my "not liking people" declaration or was that just a ruse to disguise my authentic self, protecting me from harm (and joy)? In retrospect, there are alternative means to display caring, love and connection other than in a verbal or physical sense. It can come from sharing what has meaning to a person, in this case, my father and his sharing of what gave him significance.

Robert Nash quotes Malcom X in his book, *How Stories Heal*, when Malcom X states, "Everything that ever happened to me is an ingredient."³ Following, I offer one of the spices that have contributed to my life's blue plate special.

³ Nash and Viray, *How Stories Heal*, 61.

Among my first memories of this sharing comes from the few times my family visited the local swimming hole. The Natchaug River, not too far from our rural Cape Cod style home in eastern Connecticut, a few miles from my father's birth place, was such a time. The swimming hole had all the usual accoutrements of a local swimming setting, straight out of any summer time novel or movie scene. A rope swing to perform various acrobatics from, a very large boulder hidden just beneath the surface allowing you to stand tall on top of it from the middle of the river, an ominously deep dark pool for the young kids such as myself to fear. It was all there, even the teasing from the older kids that you might get leeches if you stray too far. My dad would get me up on his shoulders and toss me in the air to wriggle and squirm as I flew into that deep hole. Even in the cool of the running river, his back, and shoulders, scorched by the summer sun, glistened from sweat making them slippery and hard to clamber up onto. On occasion, fabulous acrobatics would be had when making the treacherous climb up on his shoulders.

As I became a bit older, another great summertime activity my father would share would be his growing affection for fishing. At first, freshwater fishing, later, saltwater. We would jump in the car, at times with my neighborhood best friend or sometimes one of my sisters would tag along, and head out for Bassetts Bridge in search of the legendary Pumpkinseed, Perch and the rare but coveted Trout. Now this bridge was hardly a bridge in the grand sense. It was nothing more than two extremely large culverts that passed under Bassetts Bridge Road to allow the flow of the Mansfield Hollow Reservoir. This was a huge body of water created by the Mansfield Hollow Dam. Built by the Army

Corps of Engineers in 1952 ostensibly to control flooding downstream, it was fed by the very same Natchaug River of swimming hole fame. We would sit on the edge of the bridge casting our lines in, occasionally venturing out beyond onto the shore or boat ramp area to press our luck with the nightcrawlers and worms we had plucked out of our damp, recently rain drenched front yard the night before. There was not a lot of talking between us, I was there just to get outside, have some fun and enjoy the opportunity to bring home the catch. No one at home ate anything we brought back though, except my father as he would skin up the fish, toss the innards to our many cats, Petite, Confetti, Rat, Fat Albert and more. He would fry up all the skillfully carved filets in butter, a delightful treat for himself.

I remember these times as some of the great joys of summer. As a young boy in the late 1960's and early 1970's, outside doing what boys did, get wet, smelly, dirty as well as return from the hunt, hopefully with success and big chests full of pride and boastfully tell our stories to those that stayed behind. Dad would share with me the proper method to tie on a hook to a line, how to hook the worms correctly so they would stay on, but still have enough life to squirm about in the water, attracting the ravenous fish. What excitement would be displayed by me when that bobber would suddenly disappear under the waterline or bob up and down, letting those in the over-world know that creatures lurked beneath, hoping to steal away with the meal we had provided. With luck, and skill, but mostly luck, we would bag the creature, slide a forked stick we gathered from a nearby tree through its gills and place them in the water to keep fresh until the return home.

Freshwater lakes, ponds, streams, and rivers slowly began to lose their luster for Dad. The ocean siren song was calling to him as time went on. Our family would take the occasional trip to the beach, usually Misquamicut, one of the more popular public beaches along the Rhode Island coast. We vacationed a single time in Cape Cod at an ocean side cabin. All great fun in their time, spurring the eventual affection for the ocean my siblings have carried with them since. My father needed more than the rare beach visit. Many of his activities in life were solitary. While they certainly can be done with others, such as fishing, he also enjoyed gardening and caring for the many fruit trees we had in our yard. I think the ocean fed his affiliation with the solitary life he would one day lead. Being by oneself with something so vast and grand would prove to be the remedy for whatever demons he may have had. That he was willing to share this experience, in his own way can very well be looked upon as his expression of love, caring and devotion to me.

This phase of sharing started in earnest by my recollection during the mid-1970's. Dad was never one for new cars. He had recently purchased an old used Desoto, likely late 50's or early 60's model. This vehicle was grand in the truest sense for a young adolescent boy such as me. Huge tail fins where the brake lights were mounted, a cavernous trunk where at least four smaller humans could easily recline, an interior that went on for miles, the lack of seat belts, air bags or any of the other modern safety devices, automatic transmission on the column, big bench seat in the front where you could easily fit four if you had to. As big as this beast was, it only had two doors, so getting in the back was a matter of tilting the front seat forward and jumping over it,

making it seem a veritable play house for us all. It was hardly a family car, even in its day. I can only imagine he purchased it out of pure utilitarian reasons, and it was cheap.

Piling into our land ship, my dad, and again sometimes my best friend in tow as well as one of my sisters and her friend, we would venture down to the great Atlantic. Many a day trip on the weekends would be spent at various Rhode Island beaches. East Beach, Charlestown Beach, Quonochontaug (Quonnie) and all the saltwater ponds behind the beaches would be our destinations of choice. These were not the typical beach we had visited as a family when I was much younger. They were not easy to get to, mostly via back roads and sand trails. All public, but not heavily visited by the less adventurous. These trips were for my father's soul, fishing off the surf or the channels cut to feed the back ponds as the tide came in and out, us kids were just there to play and have fun. Not too many summers passed before I would join him fishing these locations while my sister and her friend would stay behind on the beach, looking out for guys as teenage girls would do.

My sister grew, and lost interest as did my best friend, so my father and I would venture out on our own, most Sundays during the summer. Late night fishing off the shore brought in sand sharks, flying fish, maybe the occasional Striper or Blue Fish would be landed. My father needed more. Visiting during the day and even staying late at night was not enough to satisfy his heart. He needed something to fill the void that was left by the divorce which happened in the late 70's. Even though my mother and father were not close, having spent a few decades with another person, then having them be gone, will leave a space needing to be occupied.

Remember, not being a big fan of new vehicles, Dad was in the search for a used four-wheel drive truck capable of getting him out onto the sand and in locations where the “tourists,” as he would say, would fear to tread. This would be where the real fisherman would go. An International Harvester Scout would be his choice. The model he purchased was likely an early 70’s model. All white, 3 on the floor manual transmission, all metal interior, manual change over to 4WD from 2WD by getting out of the car and rotating the hub locks on the two front wheels to engage the 4WD. My dad, being a machinist by trade, was able to trick it out to his fishing needs. What fun it was to cruise down the back-sand trails and up onto the beach, drive around and find our own best spot to settle. The days would be spent fishing off the shore, jetties, and inlets. Here, schools of Snapper Blues, baby blue fish, would run in and out with the tide. We would catch these six to ten-inch little devils by the dozens. Snapper Blues were an apt name since they came equipped with tiny needle point teeth and would certainly snap at you every chance they had. As with our fresh water catches, I was not much of a seafood connoisseur either in those days. Much of what we caught, either my Dad would eat, or we would chop into bait for crabbing or give to others that may have had less luck. If I were not fishing, baking in the sun, or swimming, I would adventure out to the beach or the rocks of the jetties, looking for long lost treasures, old fishing tackle, catching green crabs to use for bait or just observe and be lost in the ebb and flow of the water as well as the wildlife in and around it. I understand why my father sought out this peace, as I too found it calming and humbling to be part of this salty, solitary environment.

The evolution would be complete a few years later. Finally, a means to “live” on the beach for several days at a time. A brand-new truck was in the future for Dad, that’s right, a new 4WD SUV, though they really did not use the term SUV back in the late 70’s and early 80’s. To stay on the beach for several nights, the vehicle had to be big enough to house at least one bunk bed in back, two if I were along. A Plymouth Trail Duster would fit the bill. I would estimate it to be about the size of a Honda Pilot from today’s standards, so huge for the time. Still only two doors, which really didn’t matter since Dad took out the back seat to make space for the home-built bunk bed, create additional storage needed to haul all the provisions we would need for two to three nights stayover. We would need all this storage capacity on the beach which lacked running water, electricity, or bathroom facilities. Not to worry, we had our own portable camp toilet that would get emptied appropriately upon return to civilization. Dad’s machinist skills came into play very well as the whole vehicle was transformed into a living space for two as well as support a self-sufficient fishing operation. The only thing really keeping us from staying longer was the ability to keep food cold and having enough fresh water.

There we were, my father and I, encamped in our own little compound for two to three days at a time. Usually, especially on weekends, there would be a half dozen or so other excursionists staying on the beach too. During the middle of the week, it would not be unusual for us to be the only ones there for a night or two. We would maximize our stay by having a base camp at the Burlingame State Park in Charlestown, Rhode Island. It was a relatively short drive back to camp where we had a tent site set up. We could re-provision, get a shower and real meal for a night, and then head back out to the beach for

another two to three-night stay. Dad was retired, and it being summer vacation for me, we could run this gambit for two weeks at a time before returning home. Besides, that's about all I could take. Sleeping in such close proximity to an ardent snorer made my resting hours not so restful. I have clear sympathy for my wife as a result.

I cherish and remember these trips fondly, though, until recently, may not have appreciated what my father was offering. He may not have either, but I was ultimately the only one from the family he would closely share these times with and allow a peek into his solitary world. When I started my own family, I vowed not to be the same parent as my parents were, my wife made this same commitment. Seems this is not an unusual pledge. But how can you really know? I do believe my wife and I are much more outwardly caring for our sons. Vocal as well as physical displays of care, affection and pride are common in our home. We have the conversations with our sons that neither my wife nor I had with our parents. I wonder though, what my sons will remember as having been any "Unspoken Gifts" I have passed along to them.

Living in a land locked state, it is difficult to appreciate the sea and enjoy it in my adult life as much as my father. I do find the times I am able to be near the water provide a great reassurance to my soul that I don't normally encounter from my day to day life. My opportunities to recharge, however, are in solitary pursuits that I have been able to nurture with my sons. I do very much enjoy downhill skiing and a good hike and a round of golf. We can ski, hike or hack around 18 holes with each other and go hours without saying very much to each other. We would exchange the occasional expression of how we like the quiet, how the ancient looking forests of the Long Trail seem like they

have been there for thousands of years, how skiing a back side trail where very few are and listen for the silence as extremely gratifying to know you can be in this element, not necessarily conquering it, but it allowing us to be with it for that short time.

Yohaku or “White Space”⁴ is the idea of allowing or creating a place to be empty and remain unfilled to grant the events that do require space to be that much more rewarding and meaningful. This will come up several times. Looking at the space or absence of verbal conversation during these hikes, ski runs, fishing expeditions, drives in the car and so on can be viewed as that time of contemplation. Being with and without, to allow the more conscious times to hold even more cherished meaning than they may otherwise, if our space were always filled with something, no matter what that something would be.

Dad was honorably discharged from the 9th Bombardment Squadron, 7th Bombardment Group U.S Army Air Corps on March 3, 1946. He served for just short of three years as an Airplane and Engine Mechanic in the India Burma, China Offensive and Central Burma during WWII. He passed away at the age of seventy-five due to a heart attack. He was found alone, in his home near the ocean, with saltine crackers and ginger ale at the ready. Clearly, he was attempting to subdue what he was probably hoping was just heartburn. I can only imagine the panic and fear he may have been experiencing by himself and wondering if this was all there would be. Dad had suffered a severe heart attack about twenty years earlier, so he had experience with the feelings and panic that were coming over him. Mom and Dad had divorced about fifteen years prior to his death.

⁴ Diane Dreher, *The Tao of Personal Leadership: The Ancient Way to Success* (London: Thorsons, 1997), 85.

While he held a close personal relationship with his landlord who lived in a house on the property, at the time of his passing he was alone in his apartment. He received a military burial ceremony as a WWII Veteran. He rests in the town he last lived, Pawcatuck, Connecticut, near the Atlantic shore, his place of meaning. His burial flag hangs traditionally folded in our home as a reminder of him and to all those that have served. He left us before my two sons were born. They never knew him as a living Grandfather. Stories, such as I have shared here, along with photos, many of him by the shore, or at our wedding as our official photographer, are all they hold.

In her book, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*, Susan Cain writes, “We know from myths and fairy tales that there are many different kinds of powers in the world. One child is given a light saber, another a wizard's education. The trick is not to amass all the different kinds of available power, but to use well the kind you've been granted.”⁵ Susan Cain’s point is to avoid change and pursuit of a different existence simply for the pursuit. It is very likely, one already possesses the tools required to be a contributor to whatever endeavor one seeks. My father did not change his personality very much to do what was considered correct. He used what he knew, to the best extent he could to include me as part of his life.

Thank you Dad, for allowing some “White Space”. Either by design or by sheer luck, you opened yourself and your inner meaning to me at a time when I think we both were a little lonely and searching for what we thought to be true. My parting wish would be that I too can pass some different, yet same “Unspoken Gifts” to my sons that they

⁵ Susan Cain, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* (New York, London: Crown Publishing Group, 2012).

may cherish and hold when their lives become a challenge, hard, meaningless, meaningful, and full of joy.

In closing this section, I wish to share a quick story about how these gifts can be passed on, from father to son.

A gentle drizzle was coming down, the weather undecided about raining or ceasing, not unlike the decision to run through a yellow light before it changes red. He reaches out and touches his father on the shoulder asking, Dad, are you ok? They had just left the local movie theater on a late fall Friday night. Leaving the theater, Dad suddenly seemed unable to hold back overwhelming emotions, keeping the tears at bay as if his whole face would burst from the pressure. He couldn't speak at all and could barely walk as they made their way back to the car. He asked again, "Are you Ok?", but no coherent answer was forthcoming while he struggled with the torrent of emotions seemingly coming from nowhere.

Making it back to the car and settling into their seats in the dark, with a deep breath, a sense of control was managed, if only barely, as he now tried to answer his son's questions. Still trembling and holding back the whirlwind of feelings clouding his head as best he could, he says "I only hope you can experience something as tremendous in your lifetime as I have and as so well told in the movie. Always try to remember those that are "left behind" sacrificing themselves for the accomplishments of others. Appreciate them, honor them and recognize these events as life changing."

As they made their way back home, he looks out the driver's side window to the east. Seeing the full moon just cresting over the ridge of the mountains as if to remind

him of what he just said to his son, the moon seeming to say, “remember me.” He observes the night time sun, making it seem like dawn and says to his son, “There it is, and all that junk is till up there, amazing isn’t it.” The movie if you are wondering, was *First Man*, a biopic about Neil Armstrong. The son and Dad were my younger son and myself.

1.2. Compassion and Dilemmas

Why am I here?
What's going on around me?
What am I going to do about it?
- Eric Greitens, “Resilience”

For when our motivation is pure, genuinely directed toward the benefit of others, our actions will naturally tend to be ethically sound. This is why I consider compassion to be the core principle on which an entire ethical approach can be built. It is from compassionate concern for the welfare of others that all our ethical values and principles arise, including that of justice.
- Dalai Lama, “Beyond Religion”

Fast forward forty years to a more recent situation which occurred during one of my IDS classes in the spring of 2017. One might think that after forty years of awareness building, thinking as I did when the issue to follow occurred, should not have happened at all. One of my main goals of study is to examine closely where I come from, who I am and what I believe. In the end, I am pleased to see how I ended up addressing my preconceived notions about identity.

Situational awareness is, as Eric Greitens would define it, a person's ability to examine the what, when and how to react, feel or say in a given situation. Others may

look at this as mindfulness. I want to be able to challenge my beliefs, my values and ethics in a way that will expand my boundaries of understanding, compassion, and acceptance. I believe by using Greitens' strategy as one of my tools, I will be successful in that pursuit. I would find later in my studies a different way to characterize this process as it relates to writing. In Robert Nash's SPN class, he introduced the "what, so what, now what" strategy to storytelling and universalizability. It is the same tactic as Greitins, just applied to writing. Both continue to play a part in my journey of awareness.

Oh, back to the story about the class. It was an unusually warm day for early March in Burlington, Vermont. The temperature had reached the lower 60's, there was a bit of drizzle off and on during the day. People were generally in high spirits because of this treat of luxurious warmth in late winter. I was totally unaware of how quickly this mood would change in class. As we filed in and found our seats, I plopped myself down toward the left side of the circle. I try to change my seat for each class in a deliberate attempt to force a varied perspective and the interactions with and who I might sit next to. This regular change, I can see, upsets some folks' perspective of safety and comfort as it changes up the dynamic for them as well. Our two teachers entered the room shortly before class was to start showing off their traditional enthusiasm, making individual connections with students, bright eyed and bushy-tailed, ready to dive into our discussion of the day. Pre-class conversation topics with some students and teachers surrounded the recent Academy Awards. One of our teachers, Mark (name changed for this paper), had seen the nominated for best picture movie, *Manchester by the Sea*, a few weeks before. He had mentioned in an earlier class, while trying to avoid being a spoiler, how fantastic

the movie was and how it moved him. Today, since it had now won the award for best picture, sparked some conversations around the winner of Best Actor for the same movie, Casey Affleck. I don't typically follow pop culture very closely. When I do, it usually involves my favorite band, U2, or something Star Wars, Star Trek or sci-fi related. In this context, I really had no idea what was to come next or how to be with the events as they unfolded.

The topic of Casey Affleck became a bit more intense. I did a little research after class to find out more about what it was said he had done. He was accused of sexual harassment by two women on the set of a documentary back in 2010. The details of the accusations are quite disturbing to say the least. No one should be subjected to what he was suspected of doing. The case was settled out of court, some say due to the support of his higher profile brother Ben Affleck and producer of *Manchester by the Sea*, Matt Damon. In whatever way one cares to characterize it, he was never convicted of the crime, he cannot speak to the case because of the settlement and has since stated "any kind of mistreatment of anyone for any reason is unacceptable and abhorrent."

I knew none of this at the time of the discussion in class, so I was pleasantly ambivalent about the conversation. His alleged acts were described in class as him having done some "bad stuff" and he was a "bad man" for doing so. No specifics were aired at the time. I really had no clue what had happened in the past, or even who Casey Affleck was, other than making a possible connection to Ben. The whole conversation to that point was rather mild and what some may describe as light hearted. To that end, one of our classmates, Rose (named changed for this paper) in her words, was "triggered" by

the conversation. She was of the feeling that to discuss the topic in such a manner and not speak to the specifics was offensive to her to the point that she would not be able to stay in class. It was asked of her if there were anything we could do that would allow her to stay. She stated there was not, packed up her things and left.

As Rose left, I was feeling rather indifferent about her choice to depart. If I was thinking anything at all at the time, it was that she was overreacting to the situation. I had no compassion for her perception of the issues at hand. Any respect on my behalf for her decision was minimal. As I reflected further on the events, I started to think she was being the stereotypical protected, spoiled, highly reactive college student, in a place of non-acceptance of the situation, overly sensitive; in the recent term of the day, a "snowflake," a person that crumbles under adversity and overreacts to various situations. I continued to think, why can't she put on her big girl pants, face the issues in the moment and not run away from them? Why make this type of useless display rather than stay and discuss it in a more mature and reasonable manner?

Whoa! What was that spewing forth from my little brain? From what perspective did these thoughts arise? These are certainly not in consideration of my goal to challenge my beliefs and make room for others to consider and exhibit compassionate concern. They seemed to be coming from somewhere else. Do I need to reconcile these thoughts? Should I work to change them? Was I being respectful and fair to Rose? Could this be a case of situational ethics as the Dalai Lama writes that any given ethically sound act under one circumstance, may not be ethically sound in another?⁶ If I want to be

⁶ Dalia Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2001).

considered as a truly ethical person, then compassion, at the very least, needs to be part of my being, if one is to take the Dalai Lama at his word. So, what to do and how to do it, if at all? Are any actions required of me to validate my thoughts and feelings, or do they need much closer examination to determine if they truly exhibit the type of person I want to be? Compassion, what is it and where do I get it?

On the very first day of this class, as people entered the room and chose their seat for that first meeting, I found myself sizing up the group, as most people probably do. With no knowledge of many of the people there, I started to try and figure them out and how they would interact with the group. I know this is probably not a fair action to take, judging a book by its cover, but I did it anyway. There was the undergrad college student, taking a graduate level class, seeming meek and quiet. I thought she might feel overwhelmed and intimidated, much as I felt when I took my first class back into academia. There was the younger English woman, whose accent everyone was in love with. She seemed well educated and a possible source of challenge to our little group. There was an older woman, who ended up leaving the class. She had difficulty hearing, seemed rather outspoken and strong with her ideas. Of course, there were many others, and then there was Rose.

Feelings of solidarity are necessarily a matter of which similarities and differences strike us as salient...[Solidarity] is thought of as the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared to similarities.
- Sharon D. Welch, "Sweet Dreams in America"

Rose is a young, African American woman, finishing up her master's degree in the IDS Program. She seemed to me to be strong willed, have some clear convictions, and from my skewed sense of the world, a trouble maker. How I come to this conclusion is rather shallow, but I think some of my moral community has contributed to this cursory evaluation of her and others in the room.

Knowing why one thinks and acts as they do requires an examination of the environment in which a person was raised, if one is willing to take that deep dive. Nurture versus nature my stepfather would say. My adolescent days were rather mundane by most standards. Growing up in rural eastern Connecticut, from elementary school right up through high school, I had very few interactions or contact with anyone other than white middle-class folks. In elementary school, I honestly do not recall any other student of color or different ethnic background than my own. However, my best friend at home, who was a year older than me and a white boy made a very clear declaration one day as we played in my back yard. I can clearly recall the interaction to this day. We were maybe ten or twelve years old at the time. It was either I or my other neighborhood friend who was there, who used the “N” word when speaking of African Americans. I am not sure where this came from, or the context in which it was used. Keep in mind, these were the days when television shows like *All In The Family* and *The Jefferson's* were among the most popular and my family watched them. Very inflammatory, racist terms were thrown around on these shows by the protagonists, viewed in hindsight, to highlight their bigotry, but I was too young to know the difference and my family never discussed it. My older friend said if he ever heard any of us use that

term again, he would beat the crap out of us. Needless to say, I never uttered it again to this day. Not because it was now clear to me it was wrong, my friend didn't engage us in a deep philosophical or historical discussion to enlighten us, I just did not want to get the bejesus beaten out of me, he was bigger, older, and stronger so there would be no match. I do, however, recollect a certain emotional feeling other than fear and self-preservation. I'm sure you recognize the symptoms. There was a feeling in the pit of my stomach and a numb buzzing in my head that was somehow trying to nudge me to a different way of thinking even then. Being the stupid little pre-teen, I was still too naive to recognize the flares going up.

In middle school, the classes were a bit more racially and ethnically diverse. It was a different school than my elementary school and located in the biggest city nearby. It drew its students from a greater geographical area. The city closest to where I lived and where the middle school was located, was known to have a growing Puerto Rican population. Why that is, I am not sure, but they settled there in greater and greater numbers. I recall my mother distinctly saying how they were taking over and ruining the city. They were "lazy" and nothing but "drug dealers" she would say. I had no proof of these accusations, but as a twelve or thirteen year old, coming from a white rural area, who was I to question it? There were a few African American kids in the school, certainly more than I encountered in my elementary school. In one class I had, I think it was some type of English class with Mrs. Dubois, there were about 20-25 students. One day, before the teacher arrived, the single African American boy in the class, who sat across the room from me, picked me as a target. I suppose I was viewed as the injured

gazelle in the group and ready for easy picking. He decided he wanted my pencil, came across the room in an aggressive manner and threatened me with physical harm if I did not allow him to take it. He punched me in the chest, rather forcefully. He was in the clear minority racially in the room, but no one stopped him. Was he a bully because he was a boy, because he was black, because he was feeling threatened as the only black person in the room, because he had a bad home life, who knows? At the time, these were not the type of questions a middle schooler of the mid-70's asked. I just knew my chest hurt really bad and my pencil was gone. For all I knew, having very little experience with African Americans, and he as being one of a very small number, I must have concluded most black kids are like this; aggressive, outspoken, bullies that take what they want without regard for others.

I encountered a few other bullies in middle school and high school. They were white. Since I had some very good and positive interactions with white people, heck, all my friends were white, I knew they were not all like that. With black people, I was dealing with a very small sample size to come to my erroneous conclusions.

I have already spoken about the gifts of caring and love my father secretly passed on to me. However, there is more to that growing up story and other ingredients that make up my blue plate special of beliefs. Raised during the late 60's and early 70's, I was, as we all were, exposed to a very turbulent time for the United States. Our house, even in the back water of eastern Connecticut, was not untouched. My older brother, some fourteen years my senior, and born in 1948, was ripe for the draft for the Vietnam War when he turned eighteen in 1966. I would have only been four at the time. As I

grew older, I remember watching the evening news with Walter Cronkite on CBS. I remember thinking much of the news about the Vietnam War seemed negative about our involvement there and our lack of success. I wondered why the U.S was not doing better. Still, it was all very exciting and thrilling to me at the time. This, along with our success in the space program late in the 60's, gave me a bit of pride in the country. Yes, I recall watching Neil Armstrong on our 25-inch color console TV as his first steps were made on the moon and the same Walter Cronkite almost broke into tears out of pride.

President Nixon was starting to have his own troubles. I recall during the 1968 election, rooting for Hubert Humphrey, mostly because I thought his name was cool and Humphrey came from Minnesota, the home of my favorite professional football team back in the day, The Minnesota Vikings, go Purple People Eaters the famous defensive line for the Vikings made up of Alan Page (very cool since we shared the same first name), Carl Eller, Jim Marshal and Gary Larsen (no not the guy that wrote The Far Side comic). And how can you ignore a team with a quarterback with a name like Fran Tarkenton? Politically, my home was split. My mother was a Republican, my father a card caring union member Democrat working in one of the factories in the nearby city. My mother started working at the Post Office, literally in our back yard when I was very young. There was very little political or social conversation in the house that I recall. My older brother, the one ripe for the draft, was immersed in the hippie culture. He went away to college when I was four, so I barely ever knew him. He went to Woodstock as required being a hippie. The pair of jeans he wore to Woodstock hung in an exhibit about the festival in the New York State Museum in Albany many years later. Yes, he had

saved them all those years. My next sibling, a sister, was close to my older brother. She would be seven years my senior, being born in 1955. She too was a child of the hippie culture and the revolutionary counter culture direction of the country in the late 60's and early 70's. She attended a well-known liberal arts college in the mid-west, majored in Spanish and eventually moved to Spain where she has lived for 40 plus years. She has since become a single citizen of Spain in the past ten years having renounced her U.S citizenship. Growing up, she very rarely spoke kindly of the U.S. Lastly, my closest sibling, another sister, is four years older than I. While we were the nearest in age, we were not particularly close in our relationship. For whatever reason, she also latched onto the hippie establishment which she held dear for many years. She was often viewed as the black sheep of the family, having been held back one year in elementary school, earning poor grades, skipping classes, getting involved with the "wrong" crowd, and not attending college, the only one of the four kids not to do so. It isn't that she was not smart, she was. She just did not buy into the whole concept of school and was rebelling against our parents, well, my mother mostly.

I introduced you to my father's ancestry in the first section, the stoic, individualistic Russian, don't forget, Russian to me sounds more romantic than Polish. My mother is of English/Irish descent. Some say her lineage can be traced back to the Mayflower, but that just may be family lore. Her side of the family has been here for many decades and identified themselves as prideful Connecticut Yankees. Yet another group of people known for their individualism, and getting things done. So, the ground was not very fertile in our house for having close connections with each other, due to the

number of years between siblings, the lack of affection I saw between my mother and father, and the civic and social divides of the late 60's and early 70's that was brought to our home.

Being in a home that was politically, and to some degree socially, on the liberal side of the spectrum, it's a wonder how I came out of it identifying as a Republican along with my mother. One key component may very well go back to my brother. He was eventually drafted for the Vietnam War, but claimed himself as a conscientious objector. He was granted that waiver. I am not sure I ever really understood his decision at the time. My father having proudly served in war, why would you not want to defend the place that has given you everything you may have wanted? Heck, it's on Walter Cronkite every night and looks pretty exciting to me.

I never identified with the hippie culture. The movement seemed to me to be misguided and a disruptive attempt to change things for a minority of people, while the country was built on the majority getting its way. Given our lack of meaningful conversations in the home, in fact avoiding them from my perspective, I found myself in a very insular existence; without much exchange or explanation about difference, conflict or struggle, with an eye toward assimilation and sameness, and very little room for acceptance and understanding of others. Compassion and cosmopolitanism were not part of our household vocabulary or ethic. I had no role models by which to know or think these might be good things. So, my solidarity was built much more around similarities since the acknowledgment and validation of differences were very few and far between. So much so, I would not be able to find them salient.

"Virtuous persons are those who strive to achieve a balance between noble intentions and just action; they aspire to act habitually in a good way because they are committed to being morally decent human beings who pursue excellence in personal, professional and community life."
- Robert J. Nash, "Real World Ethics"

The dilemma, I have determined, is not with Rose or any other person that might fill that place of alternative thought in my life. The dilemma is not with the extra piece of candy I want to eat but shouldn't, the spending of money I don't have on an item I really, really want, the arguments I may have with my wife or kids. The dilemma, it seems, is always within me. These dilemmas are about me. Everything outside of me just exposes those quandaries. My task is to determine how best to interact with them so I can be the person I want to be. What choices or actions will I make based on my moral beliefs? How have my moral communities shaped the virtues of humility, fairness, detachment, dignity, perseverance, and loyalty that I identify myself as having, to make the choices I am electing to make? Have any of these virtues gone south and turned into vices? If so, is it temporary and will I be mindful of that fact in an attempt at seeking my goals? Is simply asking these questions proof that I am and will be respectful of that pursuit? I'm not sure I have answers to all of these questions. I do know I will continue to practice the method of situational awareness, asking, why am I here, what's going on around me, and what am I going to do about it? Through this practice, I am in hope of following some of what the Dalai Lama has written about, developing and applying inner values deliberately and as Robert Nash stated, to act habitually in a good way.

I feel I owe an apology to Rose, though she is unaware that one may be forthcoming. She deserves consideration, validation, and compassion like any other human on the planet. Conversely, this very day as I write, I attended a forum at UVM titled “Discussing Support for Transgender and Non-Binary Students and Colleagues.” One of the panelists was a Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration student at UVM, “African American, queer fem” is how I remember her identifying herself. The last question asked of the panel was to provide one takeaway to the group. Hers was, and I am paraphrasing, to move away from avoiding harm. Recognize harm will be done as no one is perfect or can know everything. What you do when the harm occurs is the key. I am recognizing my harm to Rose, not that she is aware of it. Any of my racial and ethnic prejudices need to be closely examined and also challenged as part of my pursuit to expand the boundaries within which I operate. Own the harm, acknowledge its presence, and learn from it.

Shortly after the Rose incident, I attended a forum on anti-Semitism in Middlebury, Vermont, where I live. There were four people on the panel, one of which is a professor at Middlebury College and teaches Jewish/German history as well as Holocaust studies. He quoted Mark Twain when speaking about Twain’s questionable thoughts about Jews. The quote, however, seemed appropriate and I use it here to bring home a point. "Jews are just like everyone else, and that’s bad enough."

The idea is that simply being human brings with it a boat load of anger, hate, love, pessimism, fear, hope, generosity, compassion, and on and on. Energy spent trying to

assign misguided labels or characteristics to any one person or group of people is energy poorly spent since we all already have enough legitimate characteristics to be with.

1.3. Looking for Difference

As I moved through the IDS program, I found opportunities I would not otherwise have recognized, to observe myself in human situations to take stock of what I was trying to accomplish as my goal of study and reflection. In the fall of 2017 and early winter of 2018, there were before me two such opportunities. Both of these circumstances revolve around not only leadership, but race and gender, what my preconceived ideas were or what I might gain from placing myself in observation and engagement mode. I was peaked to do so as I was taking a Multicultural Leadership course at the time making the topic in the forefront of my mind.

1.3.1 Same but Different

The first was at a conference I attended for financial aid professionals. It was held in Ocean City, Maryland. Including the organizers, there were about fifty of us there. While I knew to expect a more racially and ethnically diverse population at the conference, what I experienced was drastic for this middle-aged white man from the north. Having grown up in northeastern Connecticut, as discussed, a relatively homogenous part of the state and now living in Vermont for over thirty years, my multicultural exposure has been narrowed. The stories of Rose, my encounters with African Americans and other races at a young age as well as my household conversations, or lack of them, put me at a disadvantage. Mitchell Rice, Professor of

Political Science, speaks to other areas of diversity such as religion, sexual orientation, personality type and more.⁷ I am certain I was in touch with these alternative views of diversity over these many years, but when it's visual and unavoidable, one can't help but make the comparisons given my experiences and endeavor at self-awareness.

Of the fifty people, less than ten were male. Slightly more than half were people of color dominated by African Americans. It is a very rare day indeed when I find myself in the clear minority of a group. Oddly, it is not too unlike how I sometimes feel working at an institute of higher learning and a few of the classes I have been in given my age, race, gender and political orientation.

I took the opportunity in Maryland to be mindful of how I was feeling, what I was thinking as well as the group dynamics. As Kristen Norman-Major and Susan Gooden point out, competency has to start with self-awareness by the dominant culture.⁸ I did not travel with anyone from Vermont to the conference. Most of the rest of the group had at least one co-worker with them. The three leaders of the week were much younger than me, two African Americans and one white male.

I wanted to experience something different than I am used to: see, hear, and feel some obvious change in dynamics from what I normally encounter, be able to point to an activity or action and say, ah ha, that is xyz type of behavior because of abc. I can honestly say, other than some minor regional differences in colloquialisms and accents, there was none of that. All the participants were from Mid-Atlantic States, more urban

⁷ Mitchell F. Rice, *Diversity and Public Administration* (London: Routledge, 2010), 196-229.

⁸ Kristen Norman-Major and Susan T. Gooden, *Cultural Competency for Public Administrators* (London: Routledge, 2012), 19-30.

and much more diverse in population. Still, we all experience the same difficulties in our jobs, had similar questions about our work, and lead very similar personal lives. If we had all had blindfolds on all week, I dare say, I would not know there were any differences at all in ethnicity or race. With the visual removed, many preconceived notions also are removed making the playing field a little less certain even if I were coached by Bill Belichick. No matter how wrong those notions may be, there is a certain comfort level in having a basic, internal starting point. The trick is, being open to the possibility those notions may be wrong when they start to fail. How would I deploy Greitens' situational awareness tactic without visuals? How would I use Robert Nash's mantra of what, now what, so what, sans visuals? I would hope I would allow myself to simply get to know the person first. No individual can be expected to speak for an entire population that person identifies with.

I attended the Blackboard Jungle 8 symposium in 2015 facilitated by the University of Vermont. This was the first step since coming to UVM in what would be many to follow, of my self-exposure and education to living, thinking, and knowing opportunities. One of the speakers words have been with me since. Jennifer Finney Boylan, an author and transgender activist, in her closing comments stated, to be careful and not treat her (or anyone) as the single expert on all things transgender. I can only tell you my story and experiences and maybe of others that have been passed to me, I do not and cannot speak for others' lives. This had great resonance with me as I believe far too often, any given person will look at someone that is different and think, if I ask them a question about their difference, the answer they offer is the experience of all in that

group. Personally, I can't speak for all straight, white, middle-aged men any more than an African American can speak for African Americans or a gay Mexican can speak to that population. Unless that person claims to hold that responsibility and has been assigned it as some leaders and activist do, it is not appropriate to place that burden on any one person through assumptions. Allow space and time or "White Space" to know the person, the rest will follow.

1.3.2 The Democracy of Jazz

You are creative, whoever you are. Respect
your own creativity and respect the creativity and
creative space of other people.

-Wynton Marsalis, "Moving to Higher Ground: How Jazz Can Change Your Life"

My second opportunity was at a concert held at the Flynn Theater the fall of 2017 I attended with my wife and younger son. Jazz at The Lincoln Center Orchestra was performing. The interesting thing here is this group is led by Wynton Marsalis. As one of the premiere Jazz trumpet players of our time, known worldwide having won nine Grammy awards, authored seven books on Jazz and music, released over eighty albums as a leader, performed with and released other recordings with the likes of Dizzy Gillespie, Herbie Hancock and more. I am not a Jazz aficionado, but I do know who he is. Even with his credentials and stature, his name did not appear on the Flynn marquis nor is the show overtly promoted using his name. I had the opportunity along with my family, to see him perform several years earlier at the Flynn with a small ensemble. This time, along with the fantastic music, I was looking deeper into the bands interplay and organization. The band consisted of about sixteen gentlemen. One Latino, nine African

Americans, and the remainder white. I spoke about visual determinations earlier, so I made my estimations based on visuals of the players as well as their names as they appeared in the program. They all dressed the same, black suit, white shirt, black ties. They sat in three rows on risers with the trumpets at the top, trombones in the middle and reed instruments in the first row. The drummer, stand up bass and piano were off to the left. Wynton sat with his band in the top row with the trumpets. He did not lead from the front, did not overtly conduct and generally, except for introducing each song with a small story, kept to himself. While some of the songs played were from the likes of Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, and Duke Ellington, there were also four or five written by individual band members. Wynton was sure to explain and provide credit for these pieces. If there were any obvious conductor at all, I noticed one of the sax players, sitting on the end of the front row, occasionally giving small hand signals or audible queues.

This was a great example in my mind, of the “We versus I self-identity” Norman-Major speaks to in that the band was one unit.⁹ All contributed. All were equally cherished and recognized for their contributions. No single person was highlighted during the evening. There were solos within songs which are part and parcel for jazz music yet, they were all an integral part to the total performance. It was also a tremendous illustration of people from diverse environments working together for a common purpose.

Having painted this picture of a jazz concert performance, you may be asking yourself, so what? Indeed, a bunch of guys, with tremendous talent and common purpose

⁹ Norman-Major and Gooden, *Cultural Competency*

got together to share with a large group of people. They will continue to do this at many cities and halls across the country for several months, what's the big deal? My observations can only be based on my experience of this one performance, but these gentlemen had that single common objective and single common meaning. To perform and honor great music. For all the audience knew, they hate each other behind the scenes, have separate dressing rooms and travel in different buses, I really don't know. Let's however, say it's not true and they generally do enjoy each other's company. Each person has an individual story, comes to it from a different perspective, struggles, sorrows and joys. Whatever the differences, visibly or not, they put them aside for the common musical objective.

Again, maybe still asking, so what? They get paid to do it and love what they do. Ah ha, isn't that it, finally, meaning, a common meaning to their current lives to share with each other and others. Telling a musical story, this may possibly be their version of "Harvesting." The "So what?" question to me is exactly this.

What specifically is "Harvesting" your life? Rabbi Schacter-Shalomi in his book, *Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Profound New Vision of Growing Older*, he is clear that to allow our life experiences and journeys to go untold, not shared, hidden and abandoned, is to devalue our own life.¹⁰ What a shame it would be to feel your own life, however grand or simple, is not worth the time to see the light of day with others. Sharing your life stories with others is the harvesting of those stories so that others may appreciate and learn from them.

¹⁰ Zalmanand Schachter-Shalomi and Ronald S. Miller, *From Age-Ing To Sage-Ing: A Profound New Vision Of Growing Older* (New York: Warner Books, 1995)

Finding a meaning, irrespective of or because of difference and similarities has a strong magnetism in groups, much like a glob of mercury. You know the old experiment where you drop a bunch of mercury on a flat surface; it breaks apart into various shapes, sizes and forms, but ultimately comes together by some unseen attraction to form one large symmetrical glob. We can all be our own little glob, but from time to time, to come together and form a larger glob with common purpose would be wonderful. Maybe that's part of the bigger issue since mercury is no longer looked at as something to play with these days like when I was little.

CHAPTER 2: POLITICAL STORIES

2.1. I Am Not A Deplorable, or am I?

[The Devil] always sends errors in the world in pairs
– pairs of opposite. He always encourages us to
spend a lot of time thinking about which is the worst.

You see why, of course? He relies on your extra
dislike of the one error to draw you gradually into the
opposite one. But let us not be fooled. We have to
keep our eyes on the goal and go straight through
between both errors. We have no other concern than
that with either of them.

- C.S. Lewis, “Mere Christianity”

Secretary Hillary Clinton had her definition of “deplorable” during the 2016 presidential campaign. “You know, to just be grossly generalistic, you could put half of Trump’s supporters into what I call the basket of deplorables. Right? The racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic—you name it. And unfortunately, there are people like that. And he has lifted them up.” She said the other half of Trump’s supporters “feel that the government has let them down” and are “desperate for change.”¹¹

By her definition alone, no, I would not be considered a deplorable. Merriam-Webster defines deplorable as deserving censure or contempt. I don’t think I qualify there either. However, as you have learned, I do carry some racial issues with me from my youth, some of which may have spilled over into other identity groups. As much as one may have had distant issues on any topic, should

¹¹ Reilly, Katie. "Hillary Clinton Transcript: 'Basket of Deplorables' Comment." Time. September 10, 2016. Accessed October 18, 2018. <http://time.com/4486502/hillary-clinton-basket-of-deplorables-transcript/>.

that person therefore, be defined by their past? I also struggle with any politician using labels that imply they would not represent that person or group if elected. While it is true, a politician especially nationally, will cater to their base constituents, once elected, they are here to serve the entire population. I don't think it correct to say one group deserves more representation at the expense of another just because you may not agree. We are all citizens deserving the right to be represented no matter who happens to be elected at any given time.

I am not a Trump supporter as I did not vote for him either in the primary or general election. As to the feeling of government let down, let's just say, I personally do not expect too much from our national government other than to get out of the way, keep the country safe, make choices and decisions as closely based on my personal beliefs as possible. I do have a realistic sense, however, that this will not happen 100% of the time given the country's mood sways like a pendulum every few years. Sometimes I'll be ok with what is happening, sometimes not, this is how a Democratic Republic operates.

Let's take a closer look at Secretary Clinton's definition, especially as it relates to the list of ist's and ic's she presents. I am a Republican, probably center right in the continuum. Generally, socially flexible, but fiscally conservative. While I would not characterize myself as a strict conservative, I do adhere to many of the conservative beliefs. That is, the beliefs of Republicans and conservatives as they were when I became politically self-aware in the late 70's and early 80's. Those beliefs being liberty, free markets, smaller less intrusive government,

personal accountability, personal growth and opportunity, defending American ideals within and outside the country, aspiration, inclusion and self-worth.¹² Where do the ist's and ic's Secretary Clinton and many people and groups from the other side of the isle come from when speaking about their opposition? How did these labels become part of the conversation from the left? Charles Sykes posits that this seething underbelly has always been there, but Republicans had the good sense to keep it at bay when he states, "Until the last election, conservatives had the good taste, sound judgment and wisdom to reject and even marginalize those uglier voices on the right. In that sense, Trump is the exception, rather than the rule. Perhaps the best way to think about Trump's nativism and isolationism is to see them as recessive genes in conservatism that had been kept in check for generations."¹³ From this, it would seem that some in the right have chosen to put aside some of their closely held beliefs in favor of the golden ring of power or representation of other beliefs. We all have these dilemmas to work through, neither right or wrong. What is important or a priority at any given time for a person is how their authenticity will appear.

I have a pretty good sense as well that on the Democrat side, there are a few closet skeletons kept at bay by good sense that could just as easily ooze out if fingers are not kept in the dike. Recent events in the state of Virginia with the top three state officials is a case in point. Two having been found to have some racially questionable pasts and the third, issues with sexist, abusive behavior. Humans, by nature I believe, can

¹² Charles J. Sykes, *How The Right Lost It's Mind* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017)

¹³ Sykes, Charles J. "As a Conservative, I Despair at Republicans' Support for Trump. His Vision Is Not Conservatism." *The Guardian*. July 22, 2018. Accessed September 23, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jul/22/conservative-despair-republicans-trump>.

be very dark, regardless of political persuasion. I don't think either political side has a monopoly on good sense, bad actors or keeping wolves at bay. However, it would seem on the Republican side, we have neglected our moral and ethical stands to gain or maintain some sense of power.

If we can, let's take a peek at how I got to where I am today with my own political views. I identify as Republican because I more closely relate with what The Republican party has generally stood for in the past. I believe in smaller government, while still recognizing there is a place for government. Having just read the book, *American Amnesia* by Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson, which speaks to how we have forgotten the good government has done, I push back against authority becoming too omnipresent. Even John F. Kennedy, a democratic poster boy, it could be argued, would more closely identify as Republican today. He did not believe in a super state and felt that dollars sent to Washington in the form of taxes, only to be returned was not a prudent process of government.¹⁴

What I do not believe in is bullying, racism, misogyny, homophobia, Islamophobia, bigotry, sexism, fascism, ok pretty much most isms and ist's et al. However, by owning that I identify as Republican, some people will automatically label me as all those things and more. I live in a state that has been identified as one of the most liberal, left leaning states in the country. Working in higher education, which is generally thought of by most to be progressive and liberal sometimes causes a moral

¹⁴ Kyle Smith, "Modern Democrats Would View John F. Kennedy As A Reaganite Extremist," *Forbes*, September 01, 2014, , accessed October 21, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kylesmith/2013/11/08/modern-democrats-would-view-john-f-kennedy-as-a-reaganite-extremist/#b6c98bd3beb1>.

dilemma in my professional life. My wife, sister and her family, brother and his family and my unattached sister all identify as being Democrat or at least liberal. You have a sense of my political life growing up from Chapter 1, being raised during a time of unrest, confusion, dissent, power struggles and more would expose me to more progressive ideals. My father was a Democrat, mother a Republican, so how did I end up and remain with an R next to my name? I was old enough to understand the ramifications of Watergate and President Nixon's resignation. Remember how and why I liked Hubert Humphrey from Chapter 1?

So why do I stay? I appear to be deep in enemy territory so to speak with very little support or like-minded people with which to relate. In fact, I generally keep my political leanings to myself for fear of being labeled and ostracized given today's climate. Here's the thing, just because I am Republican, does not mean I automatically have to do or be everything that a Republican is "supposed" to be any more than a Democrat must be all things democrat, or a Muslim all thing Muslim or Professor all things professorial. It just does not work that way, though we, humans, damn humans, tend to assign all characteristics of a group to each individual in that group. No fair underwear. I have written that each person has their own story and experiences and no individual is a spokesperson for the group they identify with unless the group gives that person and they accept, these responsibilities, this includes politics.

I remain Republican because of the traditional conservative beliefs of the party when I registered back in the early 80's. Donald Trump is our dually elected President and head of the Republican Party as such. However, President Trump does not exhibit

the personal values, morals or ethics that I do. I don't hate the man. Even Jane Fonda said she doesn't hate him, just violently disagrees with his policies and decorum and to some extent even relates to him.¹⁵

Therefore, I remain. Changing parties because we have allowed our dark side to see the light of day does not seem to address the underlying issue of Donald Trump. I choose to remain and work from the inside to either change President Trump's demeanor, mindfulness and self-awareness or change the perspective of those who saw a need to vote for him. I get and understand why they did. I believe the Trump base was well meaning, but they saw no alternative to getting their message heard. They were also of the mind that it is worth ignoring some closely held beliefs since they saw Clinton as even worse. "The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any."¹⁶ The power, however, is in the true self. Power is knowing when to ask for help. Power is being able to show vulnerability to others and allow them to show theirs. Power is in respecting and validating each other's stories. I say this like it's easy, it is not, but power is ultimately the pursuit of these things, knowing there will be failure at times, and how one reacts to that failure is at least as important as how one reacts to success.

¹⁵ Flores, Reena, and Eliana Johnson. "Why Jane Fonda Doesn't Hate Donald Trump." POLITICO. September 26, 2018. Accessed October 15, 2018. <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/09/26/why-jane-fonda-doesnt-hate-donald-trump-840207>.

¹⁶ Walker, Alice. "A Quote by Alice Walker." Goodreads. Accessed October 15, 2018. <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/15083-the-most-common-way-people-give-up-their-power-is>.

2.2. Letter to Donald and Hillary

I now reference some excerpts from a letter I wrote to then Candidate Trump and Clinton, just prior to the 2016 election to help crystalize some of what I believe, think and feel. My opening epigraph from C.S Lewis paints a rather grim picture if applied to our choices at that time, but it points to the distraction that can be made if the two choices to be had are neither acceptable or hoped for, “forcing” us to pick between the lesser of two evils. The trick is for one of the evils to paint the other as even more sinister than themselves. Our task is to remain vigilant to these tricksters.

Dear Donald and Hillary,

How have we come to this point in our countries history where we have a corrupt, lying, deceitful, dishonest criminal, versus an arrogant, disrespectful, pompous, bombastic, and hurtful person, running for president? Of 318,000,000, you are the best we can do? Really?

Dr. Karl Pillemer has developed several questions to ask our elder population on their ideas, thoughts and lessons on life. He postulates that having lived through so much, there must be lessons and knowledge gained by that population that we can all benefit from. Some of these questions are, “What are some of the most important lessons you have learned over the course of your life? Were there turning points in your life? What are the major values or principles you live by?”¹⁷ Both of you being over 65, given the lives you have led, by Pillemer’s standard, should be experts on a meaningful life. I

¹⁷ Pillemer, Karl A. *30 Lessons for Living: Tried and True Advice from the Wisest Americans* (Detroit: Thorndike Press, 2012).

seriously doubt either one of you really know who you are at your core any longer. I doubt you would be able to answer truthfully from the soul. I reflect on the interview I conducted with a dear friend and neighbor using Pillemer's questions to discover the true meaning of living a full life. One of my friend's best pieces of knowledge to pass on was a quote from Robert Lewis Stevenson she has written on a small board in her kitchen. It states, "What really matters, only kindness, only making somebody a little happier for your presence." When I look back on the campaign, I see very little kindness expressed between political adversaries, both within and without your respective parties. What makes you think it is ok to treat another human being in the way you have treated each other? What kindness has been shared between you? Where did you get the permission to act this way in the public and private world? Well, I think I have an answer. We the people, allowed it to come to this. "Social practices, and the laws that reflect them, often persist not because they are wise but because Humans, often suffering from self-control problems, are simply following other Humans. Inertia, procrastination, and imitation often drive our behavior."¹⁸ We have no one to blame but ourselves. To allow an atmosphere of such divisiveness and incivility toward each other and our "leaders". In both your minds and the people that you have chosen to surround you, even negative attention is viewed as a good thing. This simple value my wife and I have tried to instill with our two sons. You can have attention, we would say to them. You get to choose, negative attention for something done that you should not have or positive attention for something done well and from the heart. We, the American public, have given you

¹⁸ Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

Donald and Hillary, the attention you crave, but I think you are interpreting it as positive attention. Either way, we have allowed it to continue and in fact rewarded the behavior by permitting you to rise to this point. While I work and struggle to “make meaning” in my life, you, and the national political process seem bent on “making mean”. But I digress as I just took accountability for your actions on behalf of all U.S citizens a few sentences ago. A bit presumptuous but still what I believe.

My wife and I along with my oldest and only son at the time, started the annual tradition of television holiday special viewing when he was very young and has continued to this day. Starting off with Halloween and It's The Great Pumpkin Charlie Brown. This begins the annual tradition which ends at the close of the year with the Christmas trifecta of A Charlie Brown Christmas, How The Grinch Stole Christmas, the original animated version, not the horrible Jim Carrey movie, and Rudolph. Though my wife takes issue with Rudolph and how Santa is a bit mean and sexist in that story, so we'll throw in A Christmas Story for her as well as Scrooge, the version with Patrick Stewart. For me, this tradition started with back in the 60's and early 70's when I was a child. The whole family would gather around when these shows were on TV. We would watch to get in the various holiday spirits. Of course, in those days, you had to watch when they were on or it was lost for another year. This made the anticipation and excitement that much more potent. No VCR's, DVD's, YouTube or Netflix to pull these up anytime you want. While my family growing up was not very close, this was one of the few times we would gather and share a common kindness with each other. It is a tradition I have carried with me through high school, college, single and married life. I

am now passing this on to my two sons, one of which has recently completed college and is now living his own life.

This short 1/2 hour of TV spent just the other night to watch Charlie Brown made me wonder what kind of family traditions you may have and how you are passing them along, if at all. From your public persona, I can only imagine what they might be. As the two of you struggle to become president, I had to reconsider my meaning making. In a letter to myself a few weeks ago, I thought I had identified, at least in part, what that would look like. Taking control of my own destiny, knowing that each moment has its own significance which will culminate in lifelong meaning. It's my life; I own it and I will write the ending. However, you two have given me a bit of pause on that thinking. How big should my meaning making be, my house and family, my community, my state, country, or world? Boy that sounds intimidating and would cause any regular human to crawl back under a rock or build up their "armor". If there are degrees of vulnerability, what is my line in the sand? I do think that this political season and what we have allowed it to build to, equate in some ways to Viktor Frankl and his experience with an elderly general practitioner who came to him for help while held captive in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II. The practitioner's wife had passed two years earlier. He was suffering greatly from her loss. He was struggling with how to live with this loss and find meaning in her death. Frankl changed the paradigm for his patient. Instead of telling him what to do, he asked simple questions. "What would have happened, Doctor, if you had died first, and your wife would have had to survive you?"

“Oh,” he said, “for her this would have been terrible; how she would have suffered!”¹⁹

The answer as you can see was his wife would have suffered greatly, possibly more so than himself. Frankl then pointed out her suffering has been spared and he was the one to spare her. "In some way, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice."²⁰

While reflecting on this notion I ask myself, if the suffering (can it be called that) we are currently experiencing in the political landscape, can be for the benefit of my children and their children and so on? Is it so they can be spared this type of atmosphere, contention and "suffering"? Maybe we can make changes now in small increments to ensure they do not have to endure such a situation. As a parent, one of the common goals to raising kids is to leave the world in as good or better place than you found it. When I was born, I found it on the edge of war in Vietnam, a country in turmoil and change. The political climate in the early 70's was in distrust and scandal. Disgrace in politics, however, is not a new thing. All the way back to Washington and the Jay Treaty, to Lincoln's administration and the resignation of his secretary of war over corruption allegations, to Truman, accused of corruption in an IRS scandal, JFK's supposed extra marital relationships and all the political indiscretions since. Being in the public eye will expose one to all sorts of actual and exaggerated accusations. Though scandal, corruption, distrust and incivility seem to have been part of national politics for many, many years, it does not mean it is something we need accept or allow to have risen to its

¹⁹ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006),

²⁰ Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*

current level. There is very little compassion when there are divergent ideas about how to move forward.

Brené Brown stated, "Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It's a relationship between equals."²¹ I feel on a national level, there is little thought given that the opposite side is equal in their passion, devotion, optimism, and love for country. There seems very little regard to allow the space for opposing ideas. It seems to be either it's my way or no way. Democracy, by its very nature, is slow, it's meant to be slow so rash decisions and judgments are not made. I am of the opinion though that deadlock is preferred over progress, at least thoughtful progress. Donald and Hillary, I think I may have strayed off topic of how I find meaning for myself in the current political landscape. Personal meaning is one thing but making meaning in this context of how best to move our country forward is quite simply, another. I struggle with the two objectives. Personal meaning versus a greater, grand meaning that may have impact on the world around me.

Part of my process to remain true to my ideals was to submit a letter to our local newspaper expressing my thoughts on the current political climate. While many may not see this to be a vulnerable act, for me putting my opinion and ideas in public is out there. In so doing, I am attempting to make meaning in this elections cycle. Here is the text of the letter I wrote. It appeared in the Addison Independent on October 20th, 2016.

I read in last week's op/ed section one reader speak about being a responsible Republican, he/she could not vote for Mr. Trump and was

²¹ Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (London: Penguin Books, 2015).

therefore going to vote for Mrs. Clinton. I can understand and respect that opinion. In this election, I believe it is no longer about Republican or Democrat or being a good member of either party. It is about being a responsible citizen. I am a Republican. I admit to not doing enough early on to prevent the nomination of Mr. Trump. While I did not vote for him in the primary, that was the loudest my voice got. I normally vote along party lines in national races, a bit less so locally. Neither candidate has earned my vote. You don't get my vote just because you are the least of two evils, it has to be earned. Both candidates are deplorable in different ways. I think Mrs. Clinton will be far more dangerous to America. Mr. Trump lacks far too many of the moral characteristics and demeanor I look for in a president. I will be voting for neither major party candidate. Many will say it's a wasted vote, or why vote at all. I feel it is my duty as a citizen to exercise my right and voice in the way I see most appropriate. While the person I do vote for will likely not win, it is important for my voice to be heard. I need to hold myself accountable for my beliefs. In any case, it's the least I can do for my two sons in teaching them a bit about some of our responsibilities as a citizen.²²

In closing, I hope I have been able to show you my frustration with this year's process. I now know that sometimes, just showing up at the voting booth may not be enough to encourage the change one wants to see. A famous quote by Ghandi says, "Be the change that you wish to see in the world." In other writings I have expressed my desire to be a player in the game, and not a bystander in the bleachers. Know that I will

²² Alan Shashok, "Third party Vote Is Also Responsible," Letter to The Editor, *Addison County Independent*, October 10, 2016.

have suffered; made myself vulnerable to ensure my sons will not need to endure a similar fate.

With Respect,

Alan

How interesting to see, in hindsight, I labeled the two candidates as deplorable myself. Secretary Clinton used the phrase in September 2016, I wrote the letter(s) in October, so like a good literary thief, I stole her idea and spun it onto the two candidates. What does that say about my use of generalizations? What have I done during the past two years to engage and learn more about who I am, what I think and how I show up? I could now include an inventory of all the specific actions and steps I have taken, but that would be a bit self-aggrandizing. That is not what this is supposed to be about. Let me say this. I am listening, witnessing, mindful, aware, tuned- in, vulnerable, caring, resilient, servant, open, introspective, learning, teaching, seeing, hearing, disappointed and encouraged. I am all these things, and more. I am not deplorable, nor will I allow others to label me without my permission. Much of this was not part of my game plan a few years ago. It would be much easier to float through life like a mylar balloon, being cast in any direction without care on which sharp object would impale you and release all your life. That is living to die rather than dying to live.

CHAPTER 3: PROFESSIONAL STORIES

3.1. Leadership Styles

I've learned that most problems aren't rocket science, but when they are rocket science, you should ask a rocket scientist. In other words, I don't know everything, so I've learned to seek advice and counsel and to listen to experts.

- Scott Kelly, "Endurance: A Year in Space, A Lifetime of Discovery"

Curating the means to explore and enrich one's personal leadership style is a very reflective process. Included here is an examination of how my personal leadership styles have been presented in my daily leadership work, how they may have evolved over time and what lessons were learned through practical execution, training, and mentorships.

I have had dozens of performance reviews in 30 plus years, conducted as many or more, and had innumerable informal conversations on my leadership approach. Training, seminars, webinars, classes, informal mentors, and observation have all informed my approach, shaped it, and helped it evolve, sometimes with more success than others. Here, I have an opportunity to apply academic examination of my styles and traits. Being able to read, write and converse about the different styles has widened my scope of examination to better identify strengths and areas for improvement more concretely. In some fairly generic terms, my weaknesses have been the interpersonal and behavioral pieces, the traits that have to do with human relationships. My strengths have

leaned toward goal achievement, focus, analytics, and fairness, the type of traits that tend to be more distant and aloof.

The million-dollar question is of course: Is a leader born or made? I think both. While some may be born with a "genetic" predisposition to lead, that inherent trait only makes itself known under the right circumstances, not too different then some genetic diseases that only appear if the right circumstances exist to trigger the defect. Those not born with the leadership trait can learn to be a successful leader; however they may need to work on it more, relying on further reflection, study, and mindfulness.

I closely identify with several of the ideas presented by Peter Northouse. These include the Skills Approach, Situational Approach, Authentic Leadership and Adaptive Leadership.²³ Let me see if I can solidify these different ideas by offering a few of my leadership stories.

Following college, I found a job at the local cable television company as a door-to-door sales representative. After four years at a few other positions there, I was made a customer service supervisor of a team with roughly 8 - 10 customer service people, mostly full time, some part-time. We expanded our hours of availability to evenings and Saturdays, so I was the primary person in charge during those periods. The manager was mainly in charge during regular business hours. Some of the people were direct reports to me, mostly the part-time employees. I had a small, semi-private workstation, but much of my time was spent in the trenches, manning the phones, or front counter to help cover breaks, lunches, vacations, and illness. I knew the job, and I knew it well. I had been

²³ Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2016).

with the company for four years at that point and had a very good grasp of operations. There was a single incident I carry with me to this day, which both illustrated my young and uninformed supervisory approach, while also teaching me a new, better direction for the future.

The work area was open; we had no cubicles in this workspace. Everyone had a desk and the front counter customer service location was in the same space as the phone customer service people. You could see and hear everyone.

One of the field technicians brought to my attention an error on a work order that one of the part-time people had made. This was an error that had been covered with the whole staff several times in an attempt to prevent this from continuing. It was serious enough to be customer impacting, creating a poor experience for the customer and the technician interacting with them in their home. The customer service person that committed the error was working the front desk at the time. I approached her with the work order in hand and proceeded to, in a rather stern and frustrated manner, correct her in front of the technician and in front of anyone in the workspace at the time. *Job was well done by me, right?* This probably appeared to her as a rather authoritarian and coercive method to address this issue. I had taken very little regard for her as a follower and was just plain rude. To me, I thought I exerted my authority, rightly so, my expectations, and knowledge of the issue. My support for the end goal of accuracy and customer satisfaction were clearly stated. I took very little account of her as a follower, as a person that may have something to offer or teach. I disregarded the occasion to collaborate with her or to use as an opportunity for relationship building. In the end, she went to the

manager and complained, rightly so on her end. He had a conversation with me about a different approach that could have been used and asked I apologize to her. My initial naive reaction was, *Um, wait, I'm the supervisor, the guy in charge, I don't apologize.* Certainly, I did make an apology. While my relationship with the customer service person may not have changed, I knew moving forward, I would not allow this scenario to replay itself. Much like the incident in my back yard as a child, being threatened by my friend if I were to use the “N” word again, I was a bit taken aback by the situation and needed some distance to digest what had happened. This time, however, I had the maturity to be able to self-evaluate. Concern for a follower’s image of themselves, needing to be treated with respect and dignity, as well as having something to contribute to a situation would all be part of how I would show up the next time, keys to successful leadership James Autry drives home many times.²⁴

The next large step in my career would be that of a corporate trainer for the cable company. Being humble, attaining authority from the group or followers and not from a title or position. Being present for the follower and their success, not the other way around are all part of what I evolved to as I hit my stride after three or four years as a trainer.

The training department had recently completed the development of our first corporate-wide training module, *Successful Supervisor*. We were now in the process of rolling this out to the field and presenting it nationwide. It was developed with the thought of having two co-facilitators present the training since it was three days long,

²⁴ James A. Autry, *The Servant Leader* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001).

rather intensive and logistically a lot to manage for just one person. Unfortunately, after several months, due to budget cuts, it was decided, to whittle it down to just one facilitator. I had co-facilitated the session two or three times by now and also presented it solo once. I had a fairly decent handle on the process and demands. Having been a supervisor previously and with the company now for going on nine or so years, I carried quite a bit of legitimate authority. The trick here though, since I was presenting this material nationally, many of the people I would be in front of didn't know me from a hole in the wall.

One such session took place in Roanoke, Virginia. The session was to be held in a hotel conference center. Unfortunately, it would prove to be one of the worst rooms for collaborative engagement. It was an auditorium set up with rows of seats bolted to the floor, rising to the back, a big stage and projection screen. There would be a huge physical space between me and the followers. I would be up on a stage cowering over them, implying a greater authority level than they had. The logistics made it nearly impossible to get closer to them or be able to relate to them on a physical level. I was going to have to find a way to close that physical space, a challenge I had not faced at previous sessions.

Since most all the attendees and I were staying in the hotel, I looked for a few opportunities to connect with participants outside the sessions. I was able to have breakfast once or twice with some, a drink at the bar a night or two, and converse during breaks in the session outside the auditorium. During the sessions, as much as the content would allow, I handed over a large part of the responsibility of "delivery" to the group.

They would do most of the speaking, they would be allowed to tell their stories, and they would spark learning amongst each other. All I would do from the stage, and occasionally getting down from the platform when possible, was to bring the session back to the purpose at hand, guide the conversations so we were not going down rabbit holes, and be sure their time was well spent together.

I had gotten to the last day of many trainings, new hire instructions, the occasional multiple day seminar and many others, but the earnest and authentic reaction I received at the end of this one was one of the most humbling experiences I had ever had and never received before. As I completed my final remarks and confirmations of learning, thanking them all for their time and engagement, didn't they all stand up and applaud. I'm sure I turned beet red and choked up a bit. This was totally unexpected and not something I was planning for. I found the Servant Leader in me in this situation by showing attentiveness to my follower's concerns, nurturing them and empathizing with them in the situation at hand.²⁵

So, tell us about your leadership style, I would be asked on countless interviews when I was looking to leave the cable industry after twenty-five years. My answer was, in essence, get out of their (followers) way, allow them to do the job they were hired and trained for, offer support when support seems needed or asked for, praise in public, correct in private (I learned that from the first scenario) and be visible. I felt this was a pretty successful approach to the situation I was in at the time. This tactic would seem to bear fruit in the following story.

²⁵ Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*

After twelve years it was time to leave the trainer position, I took on the role of a supervisor again, this time in a true call center situation with the cable company. Many call centers of the time were driven by Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) in order to gauge agent, team and center success. I loved this; remember, I am goal and analytics-driven. KPI's gave very clear cut and dry numbers that everyone was aware of to measure success. There was, however, not much room for the follower's contributions to what and how things may be measured, how they may be implemented or how they may impact their own evaluations and performance perceptions.

We had been operating under the KPI approach for a few years now. However, the company was in turmoil and bankruptcy, as well as on a court-ordered chopping block. Our portion of the company was sold to the largest cable operator who certainly would have their own way of doing things and high expectations. It didn't take long for us to become aware of several different measurements of success, how they would be gauged as well as how we would be compared to our much larger regional sister call centers. It also did not take much connecting of the dots to surmise that our existence, as the smallest call center in the region, may hinge upon how well we were able to adapt, change and perform to the new standards.

There was a total of twenty-one teams in our region, spread between three centers. We were the new kids on the block. My team, right out of the chute, ranked fourteenth out of twenty-one teams based on our new KPI's, with the other three teams in our center ranking below my team. Our new company had a friendly competition called the Call Center Cup. The team with the best results over the course of a quarter would

earn the title of best team in the region for the quarter. The best overall stats for the year earned them best for the year. I made getting to the top one of my priorities. So did my peers and my manager in our office since at the time it appeared, I would have the best chance to do so.

My team was comprised of new agents, seasoned agents, some good at the KPI's some not as good, but all contributed in some fashion. My first initiative was to hold a team meeting outside the normal weekly meeting schedule, to collaborate on how we would achieve this goal. Together we developed plans to keep each other informed on progress, recognition of success in each of our regular team meetings, provide coaching both formally and informally with each other. This approach of team support, idea generation coming from the followers added with the facilitation of skill enhancement, communication, and encouragement from me, would reap rewards. Having started in fourteenth place, the team reached the top in the region, earning the Call Center Cup after thirteen months. This achievement, to that point in my career, was one of my most proud professional moments. I told the team at the time, that I had very little to do with the success, that it all came from them. In hindsight, what I might have changed would be to engage on a more personal level. I still kept a bit of distance from the followers. I rarely purposely took the time to know them as people. However, via proximity and professional engagement, it would be difficult to not have had some of that rub off.

When examining the aspects of my leadership that work less well for me, it has been evident during the course of my career that the more interpersonal and behavioral areas have not only been a weakness for me but tended to be the least interesting to me.

After all, as we know, “I don’t like people.” There have been occasions where I would engage, as with the training scenario, but that was very difficult work for me, it did not come naturally. Generally, my technical knowledge and skill, I thought, would pull me through most situations. In the first scenario with the front counter customer service person, this proved to be a wrong approach to take. When placed in a situation where I had very little technical knowledge, I also struggled. You might think, having been a trainer for twelve years, having to speak in front of groups of people at length, relating to and being personable with people would be one of my strengths. I would consider myself an introvert. Not that I am necessarily shy, but introverts get their energy and recharge by keeping more to themselves. It does not mean we can't get up in front of people when we do have something to say, but that is not how we thrive or seek energy like an extrovert does. Many extroverts can't stand to be in solitude because they cannot energize themselves that way.

To make this more evident, here are two quick scenarios from my experiences. I had the opportunity to apply for the manager's position in the call center I was working in. Our manager was taking another position in the company. James Autry speaks to the detrimental impact of competition on a team and followers with its use, creating impossible relationships between people.²⁶ Here is an instance of precisely that scenario I lived through.

I and one of the other supervisors applied for the manager's position. A very curious method was used to help the Director decide. Each candidate would assume the

²⁶ Autry, *The Servant Leader*

manager's job for one month and be observed by senior leaders and supervisors in the call center performing the job as part of the hiring evaluation process. While the competitive nature was awkward, this was heightened by my weakness with relationship building. My technical abilities in this new role were not enough to pull me through to success and overcome the weakness. I was un-assured and found it difficult to engage with people in this new, if temporary, responsibility. The other candidate had far less technical skill, having been with the company for far less time. Her team did not come close to winning the call center cup. I actually trained her a few years before when she first started as a call center agent. She was, however, more personable, knew how to engage and be interested in people and what made them tick. Ultimately, I think this is why I did not earn the position. Our relationship was never the same. She had a difficult time understanding how to lead or manage me moving forward. Ultimately, I left the company about a year later.

Here is a second scenario, where my having very little technical skill versus behavioral skill failed me. I was hired at a startup to be the Support Manager with a team of seven people, four of which had been there before me and three that I hired. I knew relatively little about the business and its operation, so it was difficult to rely on technical skill. I worked hard to get the relationship building going. I already affirmed I was weak with this trait given previous experience but hoped the attempt to create relationships would pull me through until the technical caught up. I held regular team meetings, one on one meetings, shadowing each team member to get to know their job, working ten to twelve hour shifts alongside them when it got crazy. I worked to advocate for them with

senior leadership when things got nuts. I am aware that one person on the team went to my manager to air some concerns about my style, mostly the lack of technical skills in what we were doing. I may never know if this approach was successful or if the one employee complaint played any role in the outcome. There was a reorganization a year after I was hired, as happens frequently with startups. My position was cut, as it was explained to me, there was no need for my role any longer. I did receive two emails after the fact from two of the team saying how surprised and shocked they were this had happened and they were sorry.

Any leadership style or approach that has a deep focus on the follower will not be my forte. Servant, Transformational, and Psychodynamic approaches will generally not be my go-to methods. Each, in their own way, will be follower focused. I was successful in the training scenario, but I also had strong technical skills to fall back on. Mindfulness, caring, and empathy are all aspects to which I am aware are weaknesses and are my focus of change.

During the fall of 2017, I attended a forum held at The University of Vermont with Martine Rothblatt, a lawyer, author, entrepreneur as well as founder and Chairperson of the Board for United Therapeutics. It was facilitated by Mary Powell, CEO of Green Mountain Power. Among other significant points, Ms. Rothblatt connected with me in two ways. People live through our stories and finding passion and purpose. These two elements require a degree of vulnerability, self-awareness, and courage to explore with oneself while allowing others to see them. These have been large parts of my personal and professional focus for more than a year.

It seemed they were echoing the “Harvesting” of life concept I wrote about earlier, people live through our stories. The chance to share and be authentic with others is sometimes lacking today in the workplace. These two successful leaders clearly have this trait in their tool belt and must be using it effectively. Finding passion and purpose, in other words, meaning. They both have been fortunate enough to find this in the work they pursue but encouraged us to find this in whatever venue possible. My attempts to allow this type of atmosphere in the two previous scenarios may have been too little, too late. I understood I would need to provide the space for stories, relationships and compassion. However, my stilted attempts were awkward and likely came across as inauthentic. I believe I may not have been ready just yet to be that type of leader but knew to build upon these events for future success.

Creating "White Space" as discussed earlier with Diane Dreher, is a concept not unfamiliar to me. In the simple process of creating PowerPoint's, less is more on each slide, maintaining a sense of anticipation, room for consideration and engagement. In music, it is not uncommon for effect, emotion or style to have less going on in a song, quieter moments or even short silences, bring the opportunity for the listener to explore in that silence and bring to it, something of them self.

I decided in the fall of 2016 to pursue Yohaku, though I did not know there was a word or practice at the time. Whether it was an attempt to address my weaknesses to become a better leader of followers, or more likely a better leader of myself, is not clear to me yet. "Being Tao leaders means deciding for ourselves where to focus, where to aim

our intentions."²⁷ My self-stated intention was to challenge many of my biases, beliefs, thought processes and relationships. This is to determine if, for me, there were a better way of participating in life and leadership; to find out if how I was engaging was the best way for me; to allow for empty space to remain as such, or be filled with different imagination, insight, and creativity. I was ready to learn again and to explore these ideas. Going back to school in the fall of 2016 would be my first toe dip into the deep end of the pool.

3.2. Tribe, Meaning, Leadership

The greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitude of mind...If you change your mind, you can change your life.
-William James

Tribe, as defined by Meriam Webster's second definition is: a group of persons having a common character, occupation, or interest. Ken Robinson defines it in his book, *The Element*, as a group of people with a common commitment to the thing they feel born to do.²⁸ In other words, for that thing that gives you meaning, whatever that thing is, you have found others with similar meaning that allow you to be who you are as you pursue that meaning. Many people, including myself, spend much, if not all their life, looking for a "tribe" and "meaning," never to find them. It can happen that you may find your tribe first, which opens your eyes to that thing you were born to do. Robinson provides several examples of finding their element including Gillian Lynne, a world-

²⁷ Dreher, *The Tao of Personal Leadership*, 85-95

²⁸ Ken Robinson, Ph.D., *The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009).

renowned choreographer, to Meg Ryan actor, to Bart Conner, world class gymnast and many more. All of these people were lost until someone took a moment to notice a special quality they possessed and were able to pluck them out of the main stream, introducing them to a tribe that led to their meaning.

I had thought worth to me would be in a role of leadership of others. The corporate ladder was my access to this avenue as this is what had been part of my education, upbringing and culture as I grew and matured. Let me give you, my reader and audience, a glimpse into that world during my early professional life in the pursuit of tribe and meaning.

I have had twenty-one supervisors/managers in thirty-three years. I don't know if that is a lot, but to me it seems to be. This works out to about one new supervisor every one and a half years, not a lot of time to build a relationship or rapport. Some of them lasted for several years, some much less, but I do remember them all. Along with direct supervisors, there were any number of senior leaders, right up to CEO's that I would have connections and relationships with.

Let me start with my first supervisor right out of college. Not to worry, I will not be memorializing all twenty-one of them. After job searching for a good part of the summer after my college graduation, BA in Business in my hot little hand, in 1984, I landed a door-to-door sales position at the cable company in Burlington, Vermont. They were working up to a big expansion of service at the time. The mode of sales in the early 80's was door-to-door, so they were hiring several of us at once to promote the expanded services. I knew nothing about this type of selling or cable television. Where I grew up

in rural eastern Connecticut in the 1960's and 1970's there was none. As it was, cable television was an industry very much looking for its place and still in its infancy.

Tom, the Sales Manager, hired me and two or three other folks to canvas the neighborhoods of Burlington, Vermont and Chittenden County. As we were all new, there was no one to train us but Tom. He took each of us out, individually to show us the process, how to approach the door, how to greet the people, how to make a pitch and how to close the sale. We did this for about a week before we were let out on our own. The job had no salary, it was straight commission so if you wanted to pay the bills, you had to sell. Here I am, a devout introvert, knocking on strangers' doors, sometimes after dark and on weekends, hoping to gain entry to their inner sanctum to separate people from their hard-earned cash, to spend their time watching television, something, as many boldly expressed to me, they can get for free with an antenna. In these very early days in Burlington, cable television did not have too much more to offer than what many could get off an antenna, so it was a very tough sell. I did alright, not great, but well enough to pay the cookie bill. The sales force grew as more service areas opened and the product line expanded from twelve channels to thirty-one. Tom would set sales quotas and incentives, paying more if we reached certain goals. Tom would be a bit wishy-washy when it came to questionable tactics by some of the staff. While it was clear he did not like some of the other sales people's approaches, as long as they were making sales, he kept a blind eye. As for me, I held a pretty straight and narrow approach with my sales pitch. So much so that when one customer called Tom and accused me of lying to them in their home. He defended me with the customer and the other sales-people, knowing

full well that I was not the kind to have lied to make a sale. That felt pretty good to know he had my back.

About three years into the project, sales started to dry up, the staff had become smaller, and I was starting to burn out. My production certainly showed it and it was noticed. I had a serious conversation with Tom about my future and what I wanted to do. I was still young, so I probably could have done pretty much anything. However, instead of letting me go, he offered me the choice to come inside and be a telephone salesperson. With the door-to-door piece coming to an end, there was still a need for people trained in sales to take phone calls coming in that required skills to maximize each interaction, more so than a regular customer service person was trained to do in those days. Keep in mind, this is still before large call centers. There were the two of us taking sales calls on the phone, and a staff of five or six regular customer service people.

As time passed, my role evolved into a regular customer service position, then a sort of Telemarketing Supervisor for a small telemarketing staff on a short-term project, then a Customer Service Supervisor. This was where I stumbled as illustrated in an earlier story. For most of this time, I would remain under Tom's leadership.

While I do not perceive Tom to be a particularly strong leader, I do see, he would look out for some of us and try to fit what he needed with what we had to offer. I try to emulate that approach, looking for what is best in people, working with their strengths and minimize their weaknesses, showing that no matter what the contribution to the effort, it is valued and an important piece to success.

Knowing and interacting with senior leaders was still, for me, rather intimidating in my early professional career. I would like to write about two of these leaders and the impact they had on my search for tribe and meaning. All the information I will cover is public information. Real names and companies will be used to describe my experiences.

A video on the SAS Corporation was shown from an older 60 Minutes television news magazine segment in one of my leadership classes as an example of extraordinary corporate citizenship. During the video, as a means of comparison, there is a segment on the preponderance of poor leaders and CEOs.²⁹ I wondered if a CEO I had worked with for many years would be in that news story as an example of poor leadership. Sure enough, John Rigas, CEO of Adelphia Communications was listed and shown right there with the worst of them on his perp walk.

Adelphia purchased the dominant cable company in Vermont at the time I was working there, Green Mountain Cablevision. Remember my door-to-door experience, well it was that company that was purchased by Adelphia. Adelphia was a privately held company, owned by the Rigas family. Soon after acquiring Green Mountain Cablevision, I would become a corporate trainer with Adelphia. In that role, I made many trips to our headquarters in Pennsylvania, attended a few company senior management conferences, and presented a few times to senior leaders including Mr. Rigas and his sons, all VP's and Directors of various types. John Rigas, the patriarch, was a very warm and personable person. He seemed to care about the company, the employees, and their welfare while offering quality employment opportunities. Mr. Rigas, along with his sons,

²⁹ Kropp, Linda. "3 SAS, 'Royal Treatment'." YouTube. March 22, 2015. Accessed November 17, 2018. <https://youtu.be/ki4t3ze0454>.

did great things for the very small northwestern Pennsylvania town where the company was headquartered. Numerous jobs were provided; much of the real estate would be purchased by Adelphia, and many of the buildings in town converted for use by the company. Many of the small businesses, hotels, motels, and restaurants would benefit from having one of the top ten cable companies in the country anchored in their small community. Countless numbers of employees of Adelphia, as well as local citizens, had nothing but high praise for the way Mr. Rigas comported himself, gave back to the community and ran the company. I shared this view at the time. The several times I had the opportunity to see Mr. Rigas speak, talk to him one on one (he happened to be in town in Vermont when I was interviewing for the trainer position and took ten or so minutes to meet with me) or see him interact with others, he seemed to carry a charisma that made everyone smile and want to be in his presence.

Lack of transparency, accountability, personal responsibility with a touch of arrogance or ignorance, would prove to play a big part in the downfall of the Rigas family and Adelphia.

The company went public in 1986 which was shortly after they acquired our little operation here in Vermont. From a frontline employee perspective, there was little change in our day to day work, or how we perceived the Rigas's. Therein lay the issue. They continued to run the company as if it were still privately held, as their own personal piggy bank. This would come to bear in 2000 – 2001. Operating a public company like a private company would catch up with them. How the Rigas family lead during that time, could have been presented differently to the employees. They should have been more

forthcoming with any or all the shortcomings. Once the bubble burst, they should have taken responsibility for what they had done, rather than playing the innocent victims in the situation. Thousands of people's lives were in the balance, let alone a whole town they had built up. None of that seemed to come into play with their business and personal choices.

Adelphia eventually declared bankruptcy in 2002; Mr. Rigas was convicted and sentenced for bank fraud, wire fraud and securities fraud. His sons and a few other senior people were also convicted on lesser charges. As we operated in bankruptcy, there were many questions with few answers, a tightening of the belt, and very low morale. As employees left, very few of the positions would be filled, leaving fewer people to do the jobs of many. Eventually, Adelphia was sold off to Time Warner and Comcast.

My second close experience with a CEO of a company turned out to be equally disappointing. The only difference here really is it did not take several years for the issue to become untenable.

I had been in the cable industry for 25+ years and commuting to Burlington or Rutland from Middlebury for most of that time. I had attempted to earn the call center managers job I wrote of earlier. The results of that competition provided the impetus to move along. Personally, and professionally, I was in need of a change as I continued to search for my tribe and meaning. This revealed itself in the form of an exciting new company moving from Malta to Middlebury; to restart the company on a grand, new adventure. eCorp English was an English language training company whose primary business was teaching non-English speaking business executives, how to speak business

English. I had never heard of such a business model but was soon educated on the fact that it was not necessarily unusual since English is the language of business throughout the world. This seemed to be a reasonable prospect, they had also somewhat proven the model in Europe and wanted to move to the U.S to grow and seek synergies with the Middlebury College Language School and their expertise. We had a few clients still to serve, all in Europe. However, the move necessitated starting from scratch while still serving those remaining clients. The vision was also to build a new delivery platform as well as all new training content for the telephone lessons. I was interviewed by the CEO, Deborah Schwartz, and one or two folks who were key to building the new company in the U.S. I was invited to a big launch dinner to meet everyone, even before I had accepted the position. I was offered much more money than I was currently making along with a much shorter commute. This opportunity also would offer me the chance to build something meaningful from the ground up. A company with purpose and vision. I would no longer be a simple gear in the machine of a large cooperate entity, but instead, an integral piece of something new. It was everything I was looking for. I accepted and hit the ground running. My responsibilities as the Global Distance Training Platform Manager (impressive heh?) included hiring and training of thirty-five telephone language trainers, supervisors and leads. I would need to develop schedules that would allow them to deliver these live sessions convenient to our clients in Europe and Asia.

Ms. Schwartz had a great vision for the company, showed great passion and enthusiasm about our future. This trickled down to all levels. It was exciting, energetic, and stressful all at once. Initially, for the first few months, I would be reporting to Ms.

Schwartz. She was in the office fairly regularly. She was approachable and available to speak with. Ms. Schwartz made it clear she had hired me for the specific call center, customer service and training skills I had, as such, I had a lot of freedom and input on how to move forward with my part of the operation. I thought this was great as it was just what I was looking for, to be part of and make a difference with an organization of substance. It seemed I had found my professional meaning and a tribe of people all focused on a common goal. What could possibly go wrong?

Ms. Schwartz also spent a fair amount of time traveling both in the U.S and overseas. These trips were to both solicit investment funds (pre-Shark Tank) and to make pitches to potential large clients. These clients would be entire companies to become our customers where we would provide the needed language training for the whole organization. While lone individuals could purchase our services, global companies would be our bread and butter.

As late winter and early spring of the year progressed, it became clear we were in some financial troubles. The clients were not clamoring to hop on board, outside financing was slow to come, and the new delivery platform we were building in-house was not coming together as quickly or as easily as hoped. It also became clear Ms. Schwartz vision may have been a bit too big at that time and her financing negotiating skills were lacking or she was too stubborn to make deals. One important item that became known was that she was unwilling to give up any type of equity in the company to make a funding deal. This bit of stubbornness, the unwillingness or inability to scale back the vision, and the continued promises to the employees that all would be well was

running thin. Payroll started to be late, by as much as one month or more. She continued to promise the issue was being addressed and would not continue, but it did, even having payroll checks bounce at one point. I had thirty-five people on my team, the largest single unit in the company, waiting for work that was slow to materialize or nonexistent. The pay structure for them was such that they would only be paid for the lessons they delivered, they were not on any kind of salary. I also had four salaried leaders on my team that were on a regular pay schedule, so they were feeling the issue deeply themselves. Many of the people I hired had given up other more stable opportunities to come to eCorp because of the apparent promise of great opportunities with such a dynamic leader.

Pay period after pay period, I would have to communicate to my team the continued failure to meet timely payroll or secure enough clients to create meaningful work. At the same time, I had to show support to the organizational vision and promise that everything was being done to improve our outlook. This organizational support became more and more difficult since I too was suffering. While I held a bit more knowledge about the poor decision-making because of my role, I was also aware of the veil of sunshine and rainbows being presented.

Ultimately, I had two or three conversations with Ms. Schwartz that I needed concrete promises and assurances things would get better or I would have to resign. I could not continue to support what I was seeing and maintain my personal integrity. As it was, the company still owed me over \$4000 in Cobra reimbursement promised as part of my hiring. I knew if I left, getting this would be even more difficult.

The issues did not improve, nor could she guarantee they would. I resigned a few weeks later after having been there for just short of a year. The company continued for I believe three or four more months before folding, costing local businesses and trades thousands of unpaid dollars for services rendered, owing me the amount mentioned as well as owing a few other employees. The state of Vermont was also left in the lurch for some investment funds they had poured into the venture. Some of the people hired were recruited by Ms. Schwartz from overseas to come and work with us, uprooting their lives to be here only to have their opportunities pulled out from under.

As with Mr. Rigas, transparency, accountability, willingness to reassess a situation with clear expectations, as well as failing to face their own personal weaknesses and compensate for them were their leadership downfalls. For me, I found trust of higher authority being tested again and again.

After leaving eCorp, I would remain unemployed for thirteen months. You see, the issue there was so untenable, I had to leave with no job prospects in the pipe, but confident something would come soon. I was confident I would find something given my experience, but opportunities then were few and far between. It was difficult not to be resentful and place blame on those that may have caused some of me and my families suffering during this time. Having to rely on part-time jobs, family and friend's assistance, was not where I wanted to be at fifty years old. This period, however, turned into one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. Me and my family saw it through to the other side, with great appreciation from those part-time local businesses willing to

hire this old dude needing some cash. My wife and kids kept up strength and encouragement as we whittled away any savings we had.

Comprehensive Personal Reflection

Among the first duties of a Servant Leader, (or in my opinion any leader of substance) is to count yourself among those to be served.³⁰ Juana Bordas echoes this sentiment when she quotes the definition of leadership by Peter Block as a commitment to working on yourself first.³¹ While I couch these thoughts in a leadership mold, it should not be lost that working on yourself first, an egoist approach some may say, can be extended to any part of your life. I have offered you my personal, political and professional stories to consider. I will be casting this egoist approach to all these segments of my life. With Autry's and Bordas' ideas in mind, my journey toward heightened self-care began in earnest with a focus on leading myself in the fall of 2016.

My first significant action then was to complete a Master's Degree by the spring of 2019. Recapping 2016 very briefly, we were in the throes of a very contentious presidential election. I found that neither of the final candidates spoke to me or what I believed I stood for. While I had been toying with the idea of going back to school already, the presidential election is the event that sparked me into action to test the academic waters once again after an absence of thirty years. The challenge to myself was, and continues to be, to closely examine my ideals, my culture, my closely held

³⁰ Autry, *The Servant Leader*

³¹ Juana Bordas, *Salsa, Soul, and Spirit: Leadership for a Multicultural Age* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2012).

beliefs and be open to the possibility that what I may have been thinking for so long, may not have been the best for me, or the community around me. This idea of creating room for alternative methods, ideas and skills was brought to light by Diane Dreher with the concept of Yohaku written about earlier; to rid ourselves of preconceptions, suspend judgment and make room in our mind for these alternatives.³²

The first class I took was Philosophy of Education. I wanted to know if I could go back to school and learn in an academic classroom setting again, bringing to the fore my inner self that had been buried for so long. With readings from Viktor Frankl, Christopher Phillips, Brené Brown, Robert Nash and others, we examined the ideas of what truly makes meaning in your life.

Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative and creation, there is one elementary truth the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents, meetings and material assistance which no man could have dreamed would have come his way. Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it. Begin it now.³³

³² Dreher, *The Tao of Personal Leadership*, 85-95

³³ "William Hutchison Murray Quotes (Author of The Scottish Himalayan Expedition)." Goodreads. Accessed February 9, 2019. https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/5984606.William_Hutchison_Murray.

It was time for me to begin it. With that course and inspiration from the readings and the quote from Murray, I knew I was starting on that path to lead myself in a different way.

Since then, I have continued my studies at UVM completing Ethics Helping Relationships, Assessment and Technology, Multicultural Leadership, Leading Learning Organizations, Leadership in Practice and Scholarly Personal Narrative. Several of these align with my focus on Organizational Leadership, Change and Development. However, the first two courses, Philosophy and Ethics, gave me permission and strength to deeply self-examine all that I thought to be true as well as why I thought these truths. I was able to extend these techniques of self-examination to the remainder of my studies.

Followers want sociable leaders that they can get along with, are courteous, tactful and diplomatic. Northouse continues to state that these types of leaders bring a positive energy and create a more enjoyable work environment.³⁴ As these are precisely the skills I tend to be weak with, I have purposely attempted to break the mold of keeping to myself, but rather to become more plugged into my professional and home community. With the goal of challenging my emotional intimacy, I have taken on roles to help move me in a direction of joint work to building relationships. Since I started working at UVM a little over four years ago, I have become an at-large member of the Staff Council. The UVM Staff Council serves as an advocate for staff by seeking out and responding to their ideas and concerns, representing them to the University administration, and keeping staff informed of University initiatives. I served on two subcommittees, Personal and Professional Development (PPD) and Compensation, Benefits and Budget (CBB). In the

³⁴ Peter G. Northouse, *Introduction to Leadership: Concepts and Practice* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2017).

past year, I stepped it up a notch by being elected to a three-year term as a member of Staff Council to represent the Department of Enrollment Management along with two other representatives from that department. When I was an at-large member, Staff Council by-laws prohibited me from being a chair of these sub-committees. Now, as an elected member, I tossed my hat in the ring to chair one of the sub-committees, PPD. The membership agreed on a co-chair scenario and I was elected to co-chair that committee for the 2018-2019 academic year. When one is willing to open their heart to a greater existence, some unintended consequences, both positive and negative, can happen. As a co-chair on PPD, I was automatically a member of the Executive Board of Staff Council. This is made up of all the chairs, co-chairs, President, Vice-President and Staff Council administrator. With roughly a dozen members, we are charged with steering Staff Council as a whole. Without previous knowledge of the change to take place at the university level regarding the UVM president and his decision to resign, it became known to me that the Executive Board would have the opportunity to “interview” the final candidates to fill this position. There have been many times in my personal and professional life where I was not asked my thoughts on decisions that would greatly impact my life. This likely played a part in my closed heart armor development. What a delight to be asked to play a small role in the direction of the university. This decision would impact thousands of students, possibly my own son if he chose to attend UVM, as well as the culture of the university for decades to come. A very fine and empowering positive consequence of my willingness to become a bit more vulnerable.

Over the past year, my unit, Student Financial Services, resurrected its Diversity & Inclusion committee. As noted, one of my classes was Multicultural Leadership. You also read about my struggles with diversity as a youngster. Looking for volunteers to serve, I immediately raised my hand to be on that committee as we worked to bring more cultural and diversity awareness to our unit.

On a more local level in East Middlebury, Vermont, where I live, there is a small governing body, the Prudential Committee, charged with overseeing our water district. This is a separate, but independent body from the Middlebury Selectboard which is the overarching governing body for all of Middlebury. The Prudential Committee is composed of three elected representatives and an elected clerk. The current clerk had served for many years and was ready to pass the baton. She recruited me, with my wife's encouragement, to run for this position. Full transparency here, it was an uncontested position and few, if any, were willing to take this on. It's just not very glamorous or sexy to say you are the clerk for East Middlebury. Despite the uncontested nature, I wanted to become a greater contributor to my community and will be assuming that role in April of this year.

Through all this work that has been done and will continue for years to come, it will be important for me to remember a key element of relationship building is the trust factor. I found my early exposure to leadership from grade school, on up to today; trust has been a key element in what I believe to be a large part of successful citizenship. As Northouse speaks to, it's not putting oneself ahead of a relationship because we think we

know what is best for that relationship by what we disclose or fabricate.³⁵ Authentic and transparent actions will build that trust in the relationships I am attempting to foster.

A candle loses nothing by lighting another candle.
- James Keller

Please Alan, tell me you have more insight, knowledge and wisdom to pass along to us then just these stories, a few quotes and epigraphs. Tell me you can show the way to improving my compassion, my meaning, my leadership. There must be more then what you have presented here, right? You were supposed to tell me how all this has changed you to help point my way down the path of self-discovery.

Thank you, reader, for devoting a few moments of your life to reading my stories. What you harvest from them will be your own. I am no Doctor Phil, Dear Abby, Ellen DeGeneres or Brené Brown. I don't claim to have all, or any answers to how you can change your life. I can tell you my personal experience and hope I have lighted your candle to burn in whatever manner you choose. Robert Nash quotes Irvin Yalom when he says, "You and you alone are responsible for the critical aspects of your life situation, and only you have the power to change it."³⁶ Nash further writes, "We are all unique in our experiences and our interpretations of those experiences; the important thing is to foster individual growth, so that students can find their own path."³⁷

I could not agree more. My intent was not to give you the answers in a neat outline, bullet point guide to life. I'm just trying to figure out my own, so I would hardly

³⁵ Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*

³⁶ Nash and Bradley, *Me-Search and Re-Search*

³⁷ Nash and Bradley, *Me-Search and Re-Search*

be the one to follow. If bullet points help you with your own growth, here are my personal key learning points from the past three years of work.

- Introversion is not a disease to be cured
 - Use the strengths of my personality type and take time for self-care
- There is a voice worth hearing in everyone
 - Try not to marginalize based on who I think is speaking
- Everyone has stories they want to be heard
 - Allow the space to make that happen, model the behavior
 - Minimizing voice and stories may result in an armored heart
- A leader is someone that works for the followers, not the other way around
 - Power is not derived from title or position, it comes from the followers
- “Risk being unliked”³⁸
 - The rewards of vulnerability far outweigh the pain
- Ride my bicycle and use my shiny new tools
 - Just because I intend to use them does not mean I have changed
- Know how I show up
 - Someone is always observing, and I always have a presence
- People are OK
 - Yes, I suppose people are OK after all, to learn from, be with, suffer with, have joy with, to share with and live with

Take these and make them your own. Whether you are a teacher/educator looking for different ways to impact your students, to engage them and connect with them, a manager wanting to transform to a leader so your followers will work with you

³⁸ Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994).

and not for you, a parent needing a pre-teen to see you as their champion or maybe you are just you, thinking there may be a different way of living. Find your own bullets to develop. It can be scary to think you may have gotten some things wrong. No one is perfect. “I think perfectionism is based on the obsessive belief that if you run carefully enough, hitting each stepping-stone just right, you won't have to die. The truth is that you will die anyway and that a lot of people who aren't even looking at their feet are going to do a whole lot better than you, and have a lot more fun while they're doing it.”³⁹ Anne Lamott and so many others have stories to share, including all the people around you. Harvest their stories, then cultivate your own to find the meaning you are looking for.

³⁹ Lamott, *Bird by Bird*

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