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Only Connect: Confessions of a Reluctant Leader[1]

Steven S. Taylor
Editor-in-Chief

I draw upon my two and a half years as Dean of our Business School to reflect on the craft of leadership and the idea that connection is the medium of the craft of leadership. Because it is so much longer than my typical editorial, I have divided it into confessions (each of which are still much longer than my typical annual editorial). Each confession tries to weave together specific events with questions and ideas about how to make sense of connection as the medium of the craft of leadership.

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[1] Stolen from, "Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon" in "Howards End" by E.M. Forster

Confession 1: Oh, joy.

Being vulnerable

In March 2019, I received the following email:

> For next week's MC check ins, we'd like you to provide a 5-minute update from your division. Please come prepared to share a few things with the group on 3/12. As a reminder, the purpose of these updates is to:
> - Share your top 2-3 things that are going well for you and/or your org, and 2-3 things that may not be going as well, where you could use some help from the people around the table (may be specific individuals, a subset of the group, or the whole group)
> - Be a little vulnerable, and ask for a little help from your first team

MC was Management Council, a group of about 20 that consisted of the University President, all of her vice presidents, including the Provost, and the Deans (who reported to the Provost). I was the interim Dean of the Business School and this was the first time I had been asked to provide one of these check-ins.

I thought long and hard about what I would say. I was a professor of leadership and I taught my students the power of being vulnerable with others, so I felt a need to walk my talk and be vulnerable. I spoke about faculty research efforts to cover what was going well. Then I turned to what I needed help on – my chance to be vulnerable which I hoped to use as a chance to connect with others on MC. I said that as a faculty member I was used to finding joy in teaching and seeing my students' growth. I also knew what it was to find joy in research (perhaps not as often, but from time to time). But as a Dean, I was having trouble finding joy in the work. The room erupted in laughter. Not everyone laughed, but enough did and the laughter carried the moment.

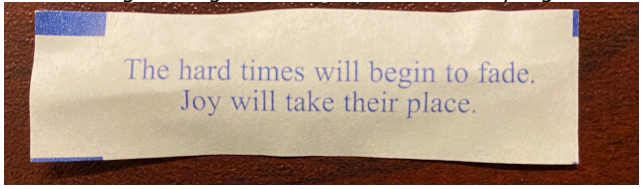
It was not the response I had expected. Perhaps I should have, as I have had a life-long pattern of saying things seriously and having others laugh. Over the years, I had learned to go with the reaction and act as if I had been joking. But I couldn't do it then. So, I just sat there. I felt disconnected from everyone, even myself. In that moment, I knew I didn't want to be a Dean.

The laughter and quips died down and then the President took the comment seriously, suggesting that MC should plan some time to look at where we find joy. The VP of Talent & Inclusion emailed me later that day, "to say thanks for opening up a much needed conversation". The General Counsel sent me a link to a story in the New York Times about finding joy. Not surprisingly, MC never had that conversation. My comment about finding joy lived on as an occasional punch line for the rest of the time I served as interim Dean[2].

My obsession with connection

I am a playwright. I'm not a very successful playwright, although I have had performances of my work in England, France, Poland, Canada, Denmark, New Zealand, Italy, Australia,

[2] And even beyond. A couple of months into the sabbatical I took when I stepped down from being Dean, the Dean of Engineering sent me a text on a Friday night that said, "Look, I got your fortune cookie":



and the United States. But, in terms of fame, reputation and any sort of ability to earn money from being a playwright I am largely a failure. And I'm okay with that. It's meant I have always needed a day job. For the last twenty years my day job has been being a Professor in a Business School. In that role I primarily study and teach topics related to leadership.

I became a playwright when as an undergraduate I became uninterested in grinding through the homework problems in my engineering classes. At the same time, I became more and more interested in my creative writing classes and the problems posed in the writing of short stories, poetry, and most particularly, plays. These were the problems of craft, problems that didn't have a straight-forward solution or even straight forward methods. They were problems that were about developing craft mastery, the never-ending questions of how to work with words to create my desired product, whether that was a play, a poem, or something else. The more I did research and taught leadership in my day job, the more I came to believe it was the same sort of thing, that the problems of leadership were fundamentally problems of craft as well[3].

I am a believer in craft and I think we would all benefit if more if our leaders approached leadership as a craft. I believe there is inherent value to the practice of craft, both for the crafter[4] who strives for quality and for those whom the craft serves. I notice that artists often talk about their craft when they gather with other artists and that professional athletes often talk about working on their craft in the off-season. I also notice that I don't hear leaders talking about the craft of leadership and their own practice of it, in person or in the popular or academic literature on leadership. Craft masters talk about their tools, their technique, and the medium of their craft. For example, painters talk about their tools – brushes, canvases – how they use them (technique), and the medium, mostly paint. It is not very clear what the tools, techniques and medium of the craft of leadership are. I think most people would agree that the primary tools for most leaders are words, but a good argument could be made that what they do with words[5] – their actions – matter more. In many ways, the leadership literature is full of advice on technique – for example, being "authentic" can easily be understood as a technique – although I think it is generally not written in the way a craft master might write about technique. But the medium of the craft of leadership is less clear.

What is the medium of the craft of leadership? It's easy to know that wood is the medium of the craft of woodworking and glass is a glass blower's medium. But what do leaders work with, what do they shape, form, and work? Is it people? The idea of shaping and molding other people feels rather authoritarian or perhaps the work of teachers (maybe even especially spiritual teachers), but it also feels like it denies a sense of individual agency and feels very at odds with popular ideas such as servant leadership. Is it the group, the team, collective? What is a group? If I think of it simply as a bunch of individuals then I have the same problems as I did with the idea of people as the medium, now just more so. But a team is more than a group of individuals. Those individuals have relationships with each other, they are connected to each other (or not) in important ways.

For many years[6] I have felt that it is this connection between people that is the medium of the craft of leadership. The primary work of being a leader is about creating, shaping, molding – in short, working – the connections between people. An organization's strategy exists so that the members of the organization are connected around what the organization

[3] Notably in my first two books on leadership, "Leadership Craft, Leadership Art" (Taylor, 2012) and "You're a Genius" (Taylor, 2015b).
[4] I find Crawford's (2009) argument for craft in "Shop Class as Soulcraft" to be very compelling.
[5] In philosophy, this comes from Austin's (1962) work and what followed from that (e.g. Searle, 1969). It's also the approach that sits at the heart of modern acting (Stanislavski, 1936).
[6] I first articulated this in an article in the journal "Aesthesis" (Taylor & Karanian, 2009) and then again in my first book (Taylor, 2012).

is doing. Political speeches often speak to who we are as a people in a way that I understand as explicitly trying to articulate how we are connected.

We know that human beings are enormously social beings and a large portion of our brain is devoted to social connection with other humans[7]. We live in an age of extreme connection - we are constantly connected through social media over the internet. But at the same time, we live in an age that the writer George Monbiot calls "The Age of Loneliness"[8] in which we feel less connected to our selves, each other, and the natural world than ever before.

Connection gets talked about a lot and yet, I don't think we really know much about connection in an analytic and explicit way. That is, we all have had plenty of the felt experience of connection, but I don't know much about it an intellectual or theoretical way. I don't think my lack of knowledge is unusual. I had the opportunity to run a week-long course at the Banff Centre called "The Leadership Craft of Connection" in November of 2017. During the course, we did several exercises to reflect on and talk about connection. It was a spectacular failure. When I asked the participants – all smart, educated, practicing managers and leaders who had signed up for the course – to talk about connection, what the important connections in their life were like, I quickly discovered that no one had any language to talk about connection. They didn't have implicit theories of what connection was or how it felt other than some sense of it being strong or weak. We tried making paintings of what connection felt like, which although interesting, also failed to offer any sort of way into articulating the experience of connection. They all had a felt experience of connection and were taking the course because they believed it was important in their role as a leader in their organization. But none of us, "knew" much of anything about connection in any sort of intellectual way that could be articulated – let alone written about.

My belief that connection is the medium of leadership along with my realization that I had very little in the way of useful ways to talk about connection both left me frustrated and created a fascinating research topic for me. As a scholar there are many ways I could have engaged in research about connection as the medium of the craft of leadership. All else being equal, becoming a Dean would not have been my preferred approach. But sometimes, maybe a lot of times, we get swept up by events. As the popular saying goes, "shit happens".

Being Dean gave me direct experience of being a leader trying to work connection. I learned some things about connection, but I should warn you that that learning largely takes the form of having better questions rather than having answers. In retrospect it is also largely about being a middle manager and this editorial perhaps should have the subtitle, "Confessions of a Mediocre Middle Manager". And just maybe, if I'm really being honest the subtitle should be, "Confessions of a Frustrated Follower." In reality, I can't separate the roles of leader, manager, and follower in any useful way, and I learned a lot about connection from all three.

My approach is to try to learn from both moments of disconnection, my screw-ups, but also from moments of real, felt connection. A few caveats about my approach are important to mention. The first caveat is that my focus is on me. I have some access to how I felt, what I was thinking, and what I did or didn't do, much of which I collected in a journal I kept along the way. I have much less access to what others are feeling and thinking, so my focus will always be on me and from my perspective. I feel confident that the other people involved in these interactions could easily remember them differently if they remember them at all. I don't believe that my memory and even my journal is a good record of events, but rather that it is a good record of my feelings and how I was making sense of events. The second

[7] Lieberman (2013) provides an in depth summary of the neuroscience research behind this statement.
[8] Monbiot (2016, 2017) uses the term to describe our times, but it was first used by the biologist E.O. Wilson to describe a coming epoch of existential isolation because we will have extinguished so many other species and life forms.

caveat is that I will use titles rather than names where possible because the title offers both some depersonalization of the other and some sense of where we each sat within the formal organizational structure, which was often an important part of the context. But as I said in the first caveat, the stories I am telling are not about others, they are about me. By that, I mean that I am telling stories based in the things that happened while I was Dean and of course I won't include everything that happened (like most of life there was a lot that happened that isn't very interesting). In order to tell the stories to best of my abilities, I allow myself to play a little fast and loose with details of what happened and when it happened. My purpose is to make a better, clearer story. But it also means this editorial is a work of fiction[9].

Becoming Dean

On Monday morning, 11 June 2018, I received an email announcing that our Department Head had accepted a position as the Dean of a nearby Business School. It wasn't a surprise, I knew she had been looking to become a Dean and was a finalist in this search. The real surprise came later that same afternoon when I got an email announcing that the Dean of the Business School had stepped down. We weren't a very big Business School and the academic leadership consisted of the Dean and the Department Head (there was only one department in the Business School). Now, both would be gone by the end of the month.

The relationship between the Dean and his boss, the Provost had turned ugly at least a year earlier, but it was nonetheless shocking. We knew that the Provost felt that the Business School did not have a clearly articulated identity and strategy and the faculty had committed to doing some work on the identity and strategy over the summer. I also knew that the Dean had asked some of the faculty members if they thought he should resign, if it would be better for the Business School if he stepped down given how bad his relationship with the Provost was and how that relationship was impacting the Business School. The response from the faculty was no, he shouldn't resign. So, we were scared. The Provost hadn't let us hire replacements for several faculty who had left and it felt like the administration was trying to starve the Business School – perhaps even to death. With the Dean being fired – and it was clear to all of us that he had been fired – and the Department Head leaving, we were in an existential crisis and unsure as to whether the Business School would continue to exist and whether we would continue to have jobs.

The next week was a blur of meetings, as we tried to understand what had happened and what would happen. It eventually became clear that the Provost's plan was to have Diane, a well-respected senior faculty member be both interim Department Head and interim Dean. Diane had agreed to be interim Department Head when it became clear that our Department Head would probably be leaving, so it wasn't a complete stretch. The Provost asked her to take on both roles that Monday morning. Diane thought about it and on Wednesday she told us (the Business School faculty) that she was willing to be the interim Department Head, but she was not willing to be the interim Dean. Wednesday afternoon the Provost met with the faculty. He assured us that the administration wasn't trying to get rid of the Business School and he told us that he wanted one of the senior faulty to step up and take on the role of interim Dean. The faculty met without the Provost present and full professor after full professor volunteered that there was no way in hell they would be Dean. No one wanted someone from outside the Business School to be Dean. The future was very unclear.

I took it upon myself to speak to every full professor who hadn't already clearly announced their desire not to be Dean. The answers were mostly a very quick "no". One said she would

[9] I have often argued that having received a bachelor's degree in creative writing is tantamount to having an official "creative license". Of course, I also argue that when the US Congress commissioned me as an officer in the Air Force, that legally made me a gentleman. You can draw your own conclusions.

be willing to be Dean if no one else was willing, but it wasn't a good place in her life for her to take on the position. And me, what did I say when I spoke with myself?

As a playwright, I am used to hearing multiple voices in my head. One voice said, no way, you got into academia because you didn't like normal work and being Dean looks a lot like normal work. Another voice said, you teach and write about leadership, doesn't that mean you should be able to do it, that you should walk your talk for a bit? Another voice said, those who can, do and those who can't, teach. Another said, you could be a hero and part of me had always wanted to be a hero. Another said, you're an introvert and it's an extrovert job. When I'm writing a play, it's great to hear multiple voices and have them disagree, each can be a different character and the conflict makes for better dramatic narratives. But when I'm trying to make a decision, it doesn't make it easier. I see listening to those voices as a process of connecting to myself, of trying to understand what "I" am thinking, what "I" really want. But as Walt Whitman said, "I am multitudes." We all are, really.

It was a voice outside my head that made the difference, a colleague suggested that since I was part of the action research world, believed in first-person research, and wrote about leadership[10], being Dean was the research opportunity of a lifetime for me. I might never have the opportunity to do a first-person, action research project into leadership again. And I could frame it however I wanted – for example, it could be about the aesthetics of leadership. He was right. It was a research opportunity that would probably never come my way again. It was a chance to explore the idea that connection is the medium of leadership. So, I didn't say no. At least not then.

I didn't meet with the Provost until Monday, June 25th. I had been in Ohio visiting family the week before and that was the first opportunity I had to speak with him about me becoming Dean. By then, I had made my choice. I went through the list of full professors with him and ended by saying, "so that leaves me. I haven't said no. Yet." It was arrogant and in retrospect I am surprised he didn't laugh in my face or kick me out of his office. I felt like I was the only choice he had and I was offering him a solution to a problem he had made for himself. I wanted him to be thankful for that. I don't think he saw it that way. It was a moment of disconnection and not a good start to being Dean. It wouldn't be the last time I screwed up.

Luckily for me, I believe and teach my leadership students that every screw-up, every problematic interaction with other people is an opportunity to learn about your own practice as a leader. I teach them to think about the interaction with others as a system and to work to understand how your own actions are part of that system. This implies that by changing how you act you can change the system[11] – change one part of the system and the rest will change in response (assuming it really is a system and others are responding in some way to what you do). Changing your own actions requires understanding those actions, both in the sense of understanding what you were thinking that led you to act that way in that situation and in the sense of the difference between the action you intended (consciously or unconsciously) and the impact[12] of what you did on the other.

As much as it is hard for me to admit this, my error with the provost was as simple as assuming that he would see things the same way I did – an issue I often talk about with my students. That is to say, I felt like I had solid understanding of reality – namely that he was in a tough place and I offered the only solution – and that was the only way things could be understood. It only takes a little bit of imagination and empathy to realize that while the

[10] My work in first-person, action research (e.g. Rudolph, Taylor, & Foldy, 2001; Taylor, 2004, 2010; Torbert & Associates, 2004; Torbert & Taylor, 2008) is the basis for my how-to book on leadership, "You're a Genius" (Taylor, 2015b)

[11] This idea comes from Advanced Change Theory (Quinn, 2000; Quinn, Spreitzer, & Brown, 2000).

[12] The idea of distinguishing impact from intent comes from "Difficult Conversations" (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 2000).

School of Business was the whole thing for me, it was only a small part of all the things the Provost was managing. It probably wasn't unimportant to him, but it was certainly not the only thing on his to do list for the day. I suspect he might have had a contingency plan for what he would do if none of the senior faculty stepped forward or if a member of the faculty that he didn't think was right for the Dean stepped forward. It wasn't his first rodeo. It was mine.

I had a couple of more meetings with the Provost in which we shared more about how we each saw the job, the Business School, and the relationship between the Business School and the rest of the university. I also met with the Provost's boss, the President. I think they both became satisfied that I didn't see things the same way the previous Dean had – around the issues that had caused him to be fired – and decided to make me interim Dean.

Learning from my joy moment

What did I learn from the moment of disconnection when I asked for help in finding joy in my work? To start, I need to unpack the (largely implicit) theory that was behind my action. I believe that self-exposure is an important part of enacting authentic leadership[13]. It is not as simple as just being yourself, it requires careful, leaderly choices about how and what to expose of your self. Ideally, the self-exposure will resonate with the others so that they have the feeling that in some important way you are like them, you have something important and deep in common (i.e. you connect). To be an act of leadership rather than just an act of authentic friendship, it should also capture some essence of the identity of the group. When the military leader tells their squad on the eve of combat that they are afraid, and they will use that fear to stay sharp and aware during the coming attack, it is meant to both resonate with the fear that squad is feeling and also to capture the essence that the squad is not driven by fear, but acts despite the fear and uses that fear to its advantage – that is who the they are!

I didn't have anything quite so noble in mind when I decided to share that I was having trouble finding joy. I don't know that I really had anything explicit in mind, but rather I had a felt sense that this was the right thing to do. I have often had a felt sense about self-exposure when I am teaching. I find myself standing in the front of the class and there is an opportunity to share a story of my own life that relates to the topic we're discussing and also makes me feel anxious. The story is always one in which I have done something I am not particularly proud of and part of me thinks is inappropriate to tell a group of students. In those moments, I feel the anxiety fluttering in my chest and most of the time I go ahead and tell the story. The results have almost always been good. It has felt to me like the students are more able to relate to me as a human being and the idea that we are all flawed and make mistakes and that it's okay to talk about and work with those mistakes has been normalized a bit. I have modeled the behavior I am encouraging and it makes it easier for my students to do so. Sometimes there has been laughter and that's okay. Most of the stories I tell are about me being an idiot and are funny (or at least I try to tell them so they are). So, I have a lot of experience of being vulnerable, of self-exposure that shows some of my many flaws, and being rewarded for doing that. This led me to feel the anxiety in my chest before I spoke in Management Council as a good sign – it meant I was walking my talk and doing the right thing in the moment.

But it was also a distinctly different thing than what I had done with my students. First, I didn't see this as a story of me being an idiot or even revealing some way in which I am flawed. I saw it as legitimate question about my own experience of being Dean. And, although this may be hard to believe, I believed that the other people in the room would have some insight into the topic – most had been administrators and leaders for many years and I thought they would have something to say about how they found joy in their work.

[13] This argument is made in greater detail in "Enacting the 'True Self'" (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010).

And at the same time, the anxiety I felt was a sign that I also knew that asking about finding joy was outside the norms of the group, that it violated the standards of behavior in some important way. The second big difference between that moment and the self-exposure I practiced with my students was the power dynamics. In class, I am the Professor and I sit at the apex of the power hierarchy. In Management Council, I sit with my peers, my boss (the Provost), and my boss's boss (the President). In that context, I sit at or very near the bottom of the power hierarchy. The third difference is that although in the moment I felt completely disconnected from everyone, in the longer run I have come to believe that it actually increased the feeling of connection between me and most of the other members of Management Council. Each of these differences raises a variety of questions about connection that I will explore in more depth.

The first question is how does the feeling of connection relate to the group norms? I suspect that this has a lot to do with what sort of norms get violated and how they get violated. If there is a group norm that says it is wrong to interrupt one another and I go ahead and interrupt someone, I would think that would create a feeling of disconnection. If there is a norm around not sharing deeply felt emotions – say, for example, the group has a no crying norm, and someone cries, I am likely to feel some connection to them. I think the critical difference between the two situations is whether I see things the same way that the person violating the norm does. I don't see the interrupters' action as legitimate, while seemingly they do, but I do see the crier's crying as legitimate. In retrospect, I thought that asking about joy would be seen as a legitimate serious question by the group, admittedly not one that we would have typically engaged with, but one that we could. The laughter told me that the group did not consider it a serious question, that in some way it threatened some established tacit rules about how the group functioned. I don't know what exactly those rules were or even if I was right that this was the dynamic behind the laughter. However, I do know that my feeling of being disconnected was not about being laughed at, but rather about not seeing the situation the same way that the group did (and here I am consciously saying group because it was a feeling about the group, not the people in the room as individuals, but more on that later). This was certainly not the first time in my life that I had not seen the situation the same as the rest of the group. In fact, it has been a pretty common occurrence and happens more often than not. Many people describe me as being creative, but I understand that as them naming their experience of how often I don't see situations in the same way as other people do. I'd like to see things the same way, I really would. I feel connected when I do.

Although I can only really know my own experience of connection, I notice that I have some tendency to think of connection as being symmetric. That is to say, I believe if I felt disconnected in the Management Council meeting, then others also felt disconnected. It doesn't take a lot of thought to quickly come up with examples where this is not the case such as having a crush on someone who has no interest in you. I think that one of the key ways for leadership in which connection tends to be not symmetric is power. Part of the reason my experience of disconnection in the Management Council was so powerful for me was that I sat near the bottom of the power hierarchy in that room[14]. All of which leads me to think that regardless of my tendency to imagine that a connection is the same for you and me, it is almost certainly not the same and one of the fundamental characteristics of connection is that it is often asymmetric.

As an example of asymmetry of connection, I recall a moment in October 2018. It was at a strategic planning retreat that the President was running with each school. Near the end, the President's facilitator came over and said to the Provost, "you have a job to do, you

[14] I am sure others would disagree about who sits where in the power hierarchy. The staff often claim they are second class citizens in relationship to the faculty, Arts and Sciences claims to be a second class citizen to Engineering, and I claim that in Business we aspire to being a second class citizen. My point is not so much what the actual power hierarchy was but what my own feeling of where I sat in the power hierarchy within the group in the room was.

need to tell Engineering to stop being jerks. This hierarchy stuff has to stop." I then spoke up and told both the Provost and the President that they had a real opportunity here because the new Dean of Engineering had a reputation on campus of being one of the good guys. And then as the President walked away from me, she leaned close and said to me, "so do you". I was surprised and flattered. And I felt real connection. Yes, it was flattering, and in terms of seeing things the same way, the President's comment meant she was seeing me in a way that I wanted to be seen, as a good guy.

Two and a half years later, I asked the President if she remembered that conversation. She told me that she remembered the retreat, but not that specific exchange. My guess is that that moment did not carry any great sense of connection or feeling for her. She was simply relating to people the way she does with everyone (I think she is naturally gifted at connecting with people). She had a chance to say something nice and she did. So, she doesn't remember it, while I still remember it clearly and in some way it stands out as one of the small highlights of my time being the Dean of the Business School. Maybe I am simply very needy, but I prefer to think that our relative positions in the power hierarchy mattered a lot in shaping how asymmetrical the connection was.

Power differences don't simply make connection asymmetrical, they often prevent connection from happening or greatly weaken the connection that does happen. I often include a set of exercises based in acting training when I teach leadership to make this point[15]. The insight that comes from theater is that the micro-dynamics of power constantly get in the way of achieving real connection with each other. Real connection requires that we relate as one human to another human and not as a boss to a subordinate. Leadership inherently gets bound up with power hierarchies, so this is always an issue for any leader what wants to work on their own craft of working connection.

When I work with the micro-dynamics of power with my students we focus on interactions between individuals and the various ways we enact power differences with other people. The implicit assumption is that if we work with individual interactions, the group will also be taken care of. However, looking at my joy moment with the Management Council, it is very clear to me that there is a significant difference between the sum of all the individual interactions and the group. We know that there are many group level phenomena, such as the behavior of crowds and group think that are not simply the sum of the individuals' behaviors. In terms of systems there are interaction effects that may amplify or change behavior and make the group behavior something that is very different from the sum of the individuals. This matters a great deal for leadership, especially as the leader tries to scale their leadership upward and lead larger and larger collectivities of people. At some point, the leader may no longer have the interactions with the individuals (as individuals) at all and only have interactions with the group.

When I said that I was having trouble finding joy and the group laughed, I felt disconnected from everyone. But I later learned that for many of them as individuals that was not the case. It wasn't just the email notes from the General Counsel and VP of Talent & Inclusion. It came up several times in private conversations with many of the members of the Management Council. They too, felt something that resonated with my admission that I was having trouble finding joy. I am convinced that I could have had a private conversation with each and every person in that room about finding joy that was thoughtful, serious, and connecting. And at the same time, on that day we could not have that conversation in the group as a group. This suggests to me that there may be some important differences between connection with a group and connection with an individual and how a leader might work that connection.

[15] I have done this work with a variety of different groups of students in different countries and the result is surprisingly consistent (cf Taylor, 2013a; Taylor, 2015a; Taylor & Taylor, 2017).

My primary insights from my joy moment are that connection is in some way related to seeing things the same way as other people, it tends to be asymmetric and power hierarchies play an important role in that asymmetry, and that connection with a group is not the same as connection with individuals. Each of these insights raises more questions than it answers, but I as like to tell my students, the goal of research is often not to find answers, but to generate better questions.

In the confessions that follow I will share more examples of ways in which I experienced connection in my role as Dean of the Business School and then explore the implications for connection. You might expect me to get to some tidy general theory of connection – one of those classis business ideas that fits easily on a PowerPoint slide in the form of a two-by-two matrix or some other clever visual form. But sadly, and much to my dismay, that won't happen. Instead, you will get a story of connection rather than a theory of connection. It is a story that tries to go deeper and deeper, but usually ends up just moving around the maze in a somewhat haphazard and messy way. I draw upon my time as Dean as primary material, but sometimes the story goes outside of that to other times in my life. So having apologized in advance, on with the story.

Confession 2: Relationship?

An old friend

It was July 17th and my second official day on the job as interim Dean. The chief-of-staff of the Business School had scheduled a meeting to walk me through the finances. He showed me the difference between our operational budget and our discretionary accounts. I learned how little flexibility we really had, how much of our budget was salaries, and why the budgeting system disincentivized us from working with other parts of the university. As the son, grandson, and brother of accountants it made me cringe.

But it also made me smile because the chief-of-staff was a former student of mine. He had been in my MBA leadership class a decade and a half before and he had been one of my best students. I had stayed in touch with him and suggested he might want to get a PhD, which he did. I suggested we hire him to do some adjunct teaching in leadership, which led to him teaching for us and eventually becoming full-time as chief-of-staff. In short, he was an old friend, a reminder of everything that is best about being a teacher, and I felt very comfortable with him. I think we connected easily, largely because of our existing relationship of many years. It made my life much simpler to have existing relationships with the staff and faculty, it made connecting with them seem easy.

Defining connection

So far, I have been using connection rather loosely, or perhaps more exactly I have been using it without bounding it. Connection gets used in a variety of ways often to indicate a type of relationship, such as "we had a deep, spiritual connection from the get go", or "I wanted her to introduce me to a couple of her connections in the industry", or "we had that Emerson connection." Within organizational scholarship Jane Dutton's 2003 book "Energize Your Workplace: How to Create and Sustain High-quality Connections at Work"[16] is the most significant theorization of connection. Dutton differentiates between connections and relationships by defining connections as short-term, felt interactions, while relationships are longer term. So, in that sense, the feeling I had when the President said that I was also one of the good guys was something I felt in those moments, a connection. Our relationship is something bigger that includes our work relationship (she is my boss's boss, I am one of her middle managers), and our personal relationship (we are friendly, but do not hang out socially) and that varies in quality and salience over time. I will use this definition of connection as something that is a short-term, felt phenomena going forward.

Dutton's argument is that there are high-quality connections which provide energy to the individuals and the organization and there are low-quality, toxic or corrosive connections that sap energy and resources from the individuals and the organization. The high-quality connections are marked by mutual positive regard, trust, and active engagement while low-quality connections are marked by distrust and disregard. All of which seems perfectly reasonable to me, but also fails to go far enough. My intuition and reflections on my experience tell me that not all high-quality connections are the same in much the same way that a master woodworker would tell me that not all pieces of wood are the same. Indeed, while Maple is different from Cherry in important ways, one piece of Maple may be very different than another piece of Maple.

As a starting question for the leadership craft of working connection, I ask what is the relationship between relationship and connection? Or perhaps what is the connection between connection and relationship? As a new Dean, I was conscious of both the relationship I had with the Provost and the opportunities for connection with him.

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[16] Along with other scholarly works (e.g. Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Stephens, Heaphy, & Dutton, 2011) and an active webpage, https://www.highqconnections.com/ with a community that has developed around the ideas.

Connecting with the Provost

The Provost was the chief academic officer in the university and the Deans all worked for him. The first chance I had to work directly with him came on August 6th. It was an all-day, off-site planning retreat for all of his direct reports, timed to be just before the new academic year started in earnest. I was surprised that the bulk of the work for the day was on what was called "the Dean problem". At the request of Faculty Governance, the Provost had been working on a document that described what Deans did, before the Faculty endorsed creating schools. For background, the University had hired Deans of Engineering, Arts & Sciences, and Business back in 2010. But at the time, largely due to Faculty resistance, only the School of Business had been created. The Deans of Engineering and Arts & Sciences were Deans without a school – this was at the heart of the Dean problem. In the Business School we didn't have a Dean problem, because the Faculty had wanted a Dean, had wanted to be a school, and had now been a school for 8 years, so it wasn't particularly important to me. But it was to the Provost.

I eventually came to understand that the Provost was under pressure from the President and the Board of Trustees to create a School of Engineering and a School of Arts & Sciences and solve the Dean problem. After all, it had been festering for 8 years and the Provost had been here for the last 3 of those. Even in academia 8 years is a long time to let an issue fester, but for the Trustees who largely came from the corporate world, it was ridiculous. Nonetheless, for me it wasn't much of an issue and I just couldn't see things the same way as the Provost.

The Provost had us working on a lengthy document that described the benefits of having schools and the important role of the Deans. I asked a question about how schools get created at most universities. My understanding was that it was not a small thing to create or eliminate a school and that only the Board of Trustees could do that. This led to some additional discussion and eventually some of the people at the retreat started looking at the by-laws of various universities. Sure enough, the by-laws of those universities specified how many and which schools existed. Only the Trustees could change the university by-laws. I thought that would end the discussion, but it did not. I felt very disconnected from the Provost because I just could not see the importance of spending so much time working on the document and wondered how I would ever be successful working for and with him. Once again, it felt to me that working together on something and seeing things the same way felt like it would generate connection and not seeing things the same way felt disconnecting. That feeling of disconnection did not help my sense of our relationship and I wondered what I might do about that.

The first break through in connecting with the Provost came at the end of August at the annual Faculty cocktail party at the President's house that kicked off the fall semester. The Provost came up to me and asked me if my shoes were Vivo Barefoots. They were – I'm a big fan and they are almost the only type of shoes I wear anymore. The Provost told me that his doctor had suggested he buy a pair to help with his back pain and they had really worked for him. I sensed that he was feeling some connection over us both being Vivo Barefoot shoe guys. I told him that I felt like my back hurt a lot less since I started wearing them. Then I spoke about stopping by the Vivo Barefoot store in Covent Garden when I am in London and I could see that I had gone too far. It was one thing to wear the same shoes, but somehow it seemed to me that I had one upped him and that was not a good thing. It wasn't my intention to one up him and it was true that I have arranged stopovers in London with the sole aim of being able to stop by the Vivo Barefoot store, but nonetheless the small connection that had briefly flared up seemed to go out.

I think that connection can be like that, a small spark that is easily extinguished and needs to be carefully fanned into something bigger. This felt especially true to me in the context of the fraught relationship between the Business School and the Provost that I had inherited.

My predecessor as Dean had warned me not to trust the Provost and that in a more general sense everyone would eventually betray me (which was not the pep talk I might have hoped for, but was certainly useful data on how he saw the environment I was now part of). I am sure that I carried some of that mistrust in my interactions with the Provost and he was astute enough to read that in my behavior.

I didn't have much of an existing relationship with the Provost as we seldom interacted directly. But I had been on the search committee when he was hired into the position three years earlier. And he had made the decision to promote me from associate to full professor. So, in that way we had a fair amount of knowledge about each other, me from the search and he from the promotion process. I had also had lunch with an ex-Dean when I was thinking about taking the job, who had told me that he liked the Provost and enjoyed chatting about music and food with him. A colleague in the Business School had suggested that the Provost might think of me as his creature since had promoted me and made me a full professor. In short, our relationship included a lot of intellectual knowledge about each other, but very little embodied experience of each other.

The conversation about the shoes had felt like the first, real, unguarded experience of connection between us. And then I blew it and it became something different. For a moment it was just too guys talking about shoes that helped with their back pain. And somehow it became something about who was more worldly, who shopped where, who was better on some strange hierarchy that hadn't occurred to me even existed. Of course, all of that was unsaid, and perhaps my sensing of what was happening was completely off base. My real insight here is that connection is a felt experience, that it is not about what you say to each other, but how it feels when you are saying it and hearing what they say (or don't say). And it is often a delicate, fleeting thing that can be snuffed out with a little intrusion of power dynamics.

I did better the next time I felt that I connected with the Provost. It was the first Faculty meeting of the year and all of the new Faculty were formally introduced. I was to be introduced as the new Dean of the Business School, and I had chosen to wear a tie that featured three images of the actor James Dean on it. When the Provost saw the tie, he burst out laughing and made a comment about loving my Dean tie. I think he was the only person who laughed out loud about my wearing of the Dean tie to be introduced as Dean. I thought it was very funny and was tremendously pleased with myself for wearing it. It felt like the Provost also thought it was funny, so there it was – connection. And this time I didn't ruin it by saying anything. I just smiled and laughed a little with him.

It felt to me that this small moment of connection around my tie and even the moment around the shoes were the start of having a better

relationship with the Provost. They weren't connections around work, but more around being human beings, and even more so, guys of a certain age with things in common – back pain, an appreciation of James Dean. Having things in common feels like a pathway into connection and also means that you see certain things in a similar way because you have had similar experiences. I can have a moment of connection with someone because we both like single malt scotch or we both love the stairs in the Horta House in Brussels. A relationship is built with small moments of connection or disconnection and I think of the relationship as the context for the moments of connection to happen or not. It is easier to connect when the relationship is strong and those moments of connection make the relationship stronger. It is harder to connect when the relationship is weak and moments of disconnection weaken the relationship. Of course, a relationship is much more complex than my use of the unidimensional strong and weak imply.

There are many different types of relationships, which are often defined in terms of the two people – married, boss/subordinate, friends, family, neighbors, frenemies, work-wife, friends-with-benefits, the list is endless. Within those different types they again vary in more ways than simply being weaker or stronger and when I think about it, I may have more than one type of relationship with the same person. The big difference with connection is that there is lots of language to talk about relationships, there is a seemingly endless way to describe a relationship.

The question that comes up for me as leadership scholar is how relationship and connection work along those dimensions of complexity and difference. To put it more practically, does a connection around one thing, such as a shared love of single malt scotch translate into connection around something else, such as the way to increase enrollment in the Business School graduate programs? Does playing golf together on the weekend translate into sales during the week? There is certainly an implicit theory in much of the sales culture in American businesses that connection in one domain is helpful in another. This underlies the enormous amount of money spent on wining and dining important customers, having corporate luxury boxes at sporting events, and so on. Does it work? I suspect it does to some degree. Would it work for me with the Provost? Not so much. Or more to the point, I never got the chance to find out how our relationship would progress and whether a foundation of shoes and James Dean would lead to his support of the efforts I felt were important to increase enrollments. On September 6th, the Provost announced that he would be stepping down from the role on September 14th. The Dean of Engineering was appointed as the new Provost and the Head of Electrical and Computer Engineering became the new Dean of Engineering.

I had virtually no relationship with the new Provost, although I had known the new Dean of Engineering for many years. I would have described our relationship as collegial and friendly with a solid base of mutual respect. Did we see things the same way, did we connect? That remained to be seen, but it felt like there was a good chance of it. We had close to twenty years of teaching at the university and that sort of proximity meant that we probably understood a lot of things the same way.

And that raises an important question about connection. If it is about seeing things the same way, about having common experiences, about resonance with each other, then it is also most likely to happen with others who are like us. It is less likely or simply more difficult to connect with others who are different than we are, others who have a very different set of life experiences. I felt like I had connected with the Provost in a very old dude sort of way around shoes that were good for our backs and James Dean. That sort of connection wasn't going to happen with people who very different from me. In a world that is both increasingly diverse and increasingly claims to value that diversity, how do we connect across those differences?

The nuclear option

Meanwhile, a storm was brewing that would soon suck up nearly all the energy and attention of the administration and Faculty at the university and prove to be a lesson in disconnection. Over the course of the last decade, the Board of Trustees had spent a lot of time and energy looking at their own processes, revising those processes to be more effective and then documenting those Board processes in the bylaws. This had included including two members of the Faculty on most Board Committees as voting members of those committees, something that is a fairly unusual thing to do in American academia. I think this was part of an effort to strengthen the connections between the Faculty and the Board, which seemed to be working as far as I could tell.

The Board had looked at how our bylaws compared with other university's bylaws[17] (the dreaded best practices review) and had the insight that other universities' bylaws were different in a significant way. While our bylaws were very good at describing the Board processes, other universities' bylaws also spoke about how the university was managed in a way that ours did not. Most universities' bylaws defined schools within the university and the roles of Deans and a variety of other things about how the university operated. The Board took this as an opportunity and set to work to revise the bylaws to address these issues.

The Board approved the changes to the bylaws on November 2nd. The Faculty were told about the changes at a Faculty meeting the following Thursday, November 8th. The emails started flying through the ether almost immediately. The Faculty were angry. One emailed, "the trustees are used to operating in the corporate world; asking for input from 'low-lifes like us' and vetting decisions takes much too long when you are used to being in charge." Other Faculty described the Board as having used the "nuclear option". It got very ugly very fast. The Secretary of the Faculty called for a special meeting of the Faculty to be held on Thursday, November 15th.

That morning, the Chairman of the Board of Trustees had sent a message to the Faculty saying in part:

> Note that regular bylaws updates are a core part of the Board's responsibilities as we continuously seek to ensure we are aligned with best practices in higher education. In the second part of the resolution, the Board established a working group of trustees, faculty and administrators charged with responsibility for developing the specifics of how the new bylaws should be interpreted and implemented. The Board intends the working group to be a serious and meaningful opportunity to work together in a collaborative spirit.

I think it was largely seen as a cynical message meant to calm down the Faculty who were in no mood to be calmed down. They were more in a mood for blood. In an academic, metaphorical way, not a literal way.

In the week between the Faculty learning of the changes to the bylaws and the special Faculty meeting, I had this email exchange with one of the senior Faculty in the Business School:

> Faculty: Steve - You should know that among senior faculty on the phone call I was just on, there is a great deal of skepticism and cynicism expressed about the "collaboration working group". Just be forewarned

[17] I don't know what started this process and I have always guessed that the discussion around bylaws that I started at the Provost's retreat was purely coincidence. And in the absence of any evidence to the contrary I am sticking with the idea that it was coincidence. Yes, coincidence, I'm going with that.

> Steve: Thanks. That skepticism was expressed to me directly on Thursday.
>
> Faculty: Hopefully you will have the courage to discern and do the right thing. Good luck!
>
> Steve: I am more hoping for the wisdom to see what the right thing is. And I hope that I keep getting help in understanding how various folks understand the issues.
>
> Faculty: That certainly feels like a worthwhile goal but in the end whosever wisdom you ultimately embrace will depend, I suspect, on whose side you are on.
>
> Steve: I think real wisdom would be finding a path that does not come to choosing sides. I don't know what that path looks like, or even have much confidence that I can find it or be able to get others to follow it if I manage to find it. It's hard not to feel a real sense of regret that we find ourselves here.
>
> Faculty: I couldn't disagree with you more - maybe this is true if you are talking about the wisdom traditions, which in my world draw from the wisdom derived from years of contemplative practice and deep personal understanding (awe?) of existence and life. No self. Openness. Kindness. Non-attachment to any one path. But on a politically charged matter like what is happening right now, ultimately there is no path that doesn't take sides. It will come down to power and discipline and whose side you are on and how much courage we will have to voice your views and speak/act truth to power. In the end there will be winners and losers. Right now faculty governance in particular is the big loser. And "collaboration working group" - a term made up in the aftermath speaks a kind of Orwellian Newspeak that I find chilling. And it didn't have to come to this. The President and the Board of Trustees have elected to use the nuclear option and I don't think there is any coming back from that. There is no enlightened middle ground that will lead us to greener pastures. It is now part of the historical record and will reverberate with discord and dissonance for many, many years to come.

I have never tended to see things politically. I know that humans are political and different groups have different interests. But my natural tendency is to see events in instrumental terms[18]. This is part of why I didn't anticipate how big of a deal the Board's changes to the bylaws would be.

A political understanding of the world is part of being a social animal. We want and need to be part of a group and we have evolved to do things in the interest of the group(s) of which we are part. In contrast, the instrumental view is more recent and for me it is based in the enlightenment and the relatively modern ideas of science as a way to pursue truth. A little while back I was at a small conference and after one session I was speaking with one of the other folks at the conference. She said, "you all seem committed to this process of seeking evidence and then making conclusions and taking a position based on the available evidence." I responded, "yes, that's how science works." She said, "I was trained as a lawyer

[18] For many years when I taught a basic organizational behavior class, I used Bolman and Deal's (2003) text "Reframing Organizations", which sees organizations through four different frames: structural, political, symbolic, and human resources. Most of my students were STEM folks and like me they tended to see things through the structural/instrumental frame. So, we spent a lot of time working on how to see through the political and other frames. Nonetheless, it always takes some conscious effort for me to do that.

and I was trained to take a position and then look for evidence that supported that position to make my argument." We've had lawyers a lot longer than we've had scientists.

The scientific approach to finding truth implies that there is a single truth to find. When the Faculty member talks about speaking truth to power that implies that there are multiple truths and of course, intellectually it is easy to see that especially in the social world, one person's truth or one group's truth is not the same as another's. Even in the physical world, truth tends to be particular and local. For example, when the heat is on, the thermostat in my apartment will tell me that it is 80 degrees. A thermometer tells me that the air temperature by the thermostat is 72 degrees. Is my thermostat wrong, is it lying to me? But when the heat is off, the thermostat tells me the same truth as the thermometer. The reality is that the thermostat's truth is that it is 80 degrees when the heat is on because the main heating vent is in the wall behind it and the thermostat is experiencing a temperature of 80 degrees. In the bigger picture the thermostat should not be in that spot on the wall if it is to best serve the purpose of regulating the temperature in the apartment. But that's hardly the thermostat's fault and I can't expect it to move itself.

There are clear implications for leadership as the craft of working connection. As long as there are different interests, it may be impossible to see things the same way and connect. Politics can prevent connection or at least make it that much more difficult to achieve. Theories of negotiation[19] argue that it is critical to find common interests or at least to find solutions that can address disparate interests. But that assumes that we are concerned with the instrumental interests of the groups involved. And if the only thing at stake was what is in the best interest of the university, it would have been relatively easy to find common ground. It was clear to everyone that both the Board of Trustees and the Faculty had a deep passion and love for the university and wanted what was best for it. But that wasn't the only thing at stake. There were also the questions of power, how important issues get decided, and who gets to decide. These are fundamentally political questions, questions of governance, questions that are in some fashion win/lose, zero-sum issues.

I'd like to say that this was the only time that politics were an issue during my years as a Dean, but no one would believe me. In a resource constrained environment, there are always zero-sum aspects. In our centralized budgeting process every Faculty line that we were given in Business was a Faculty line that neither Engineering nor Arts & Sciences got. My tendency to not see things as political often got me into trouble and it is one of the reasons I didn't want to continue as a Dean. But it raises the question for me, is it possible to be political and also foster connection? I have read stories of US Senators being very good friends with Senators from the other party. These stories seem to be based in personally liking the other and also finding common ground – things they see in the same way where they could work in a bi-partisan way. It also points to what can be a great challenge for any leader – finding ways to connect with others who have different interests.

At the special Faculty meeting, several of the Faculty came with prepared remarks in which they spoke eloquently about the problems with the changes to the bylaws. As an example, the Board had included a section of the bylaws that explicitly defined academic freedom. They had taken the text from the Faculty Handbook on academic freedom and made a couple of what I am sure they felt were small edits. I believe that the Board felt that they were doing something good for the Faculty by inscribing academic freedom in the bylaws of the university. Several Faculty members went into considerable detail to articulate how the small changes that had been made and the fact that it was now defined by the Board of Trustees rather than the Faculty completely undermined the essence of academic freedom. Other Faculty spoke about how they believed the Board's intentions were good even if the results were problematic in various ways. The discussion was passionate and respectful.

[19] These are the about integrative negotiation (e.g. Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1981) as opposed to distributive (fixed-pie, zero sum) negotiation.

This may seem odd, but I felt a real love for the Faculty in that meeting. For me, this was the Faculty at their best, engaging in intense discussion and listening to each other with respect and openness to being influenced. I felt very connected to the Faculty as a whole. I also noted that the Faculty members who knew some of the Trustees well, tended to argue that the Trustees had good intentions, while those who argued that the Trustees had bad intentions (such as this being the start of the path to ending academic freedom and tenure) did not have relationships with the Trustees (that I knew of) and were people that seemed more naturally political to me. I came away from the meeting believing that the real issue was that the Trustees had acted without consulting the Faculty. After years of moving towards greater Faculty involvement in the work of the Board, here, when it really mattered, they had gone off and unilaterally made huge changes to things that mattered to the Faculty. No one suggested that the Board didn't have the right to do this or the power to do this. Nonetheless, the Faculty felt betrayed and wounded by what the Board had done. At the end of the meeting the Faculty passed a strongly worded motion condemning the changes to the bylaws and the lack of consultation with the Faculty.

The meeting highlighted an aspect of the relationship between relationship and connection. For the Faculty who had a relationship with the Trustees, the bylaws changes were not as disconnecting as for those who didn't have that relationship. It seemed clear to me that those relationships were serving as the context for and impacted the felt connection from the moment. That isn't to say that it is as simple as the idea that a strong relationship makes a disconnecting action less disconnecting. I think that a strong relationship could also amplify the felt level of disconnection making it more so – imagine a spouse being betrayed by their partner cheating on them. I suspect for some Faculty who had a relationship with the Trustees that this feeling of disconnection changed that relationship. Or as I later learned it changed their relationship to the group, "The Board of Trustees", but not to the individual Trustees that they had known for years. So, here again when it comes to connection and relationship, the group is not simply the sum of the individuals and connection and relationship can happen not only between individuals, but also between and individuals and groups and between groups[20].

The Trustees and administration responded to the Faculty by delaying the implementation of the new bylaws until the end of December and forming a task force which included several Faculty, the President and Provost, and a couple of Trustees. That group met several times and charted a path forward that created a working group to address the issues with the bylaw changes that the Faculty had identified and delay the implementation of the bylaws until the May Board meeting. That gave the working group the spring to find a solution that was acceptable to the Faculty, the Board, and the Administration. The working group consisted of four Faculty, two Trustees, and the President and the Provost. It felt like an uneasy peace had been brokered, where the distrust and disconnection were somewhat lessoned, but was far from being gone.

The most obvious lesson from this was one that we all knew already. Relationships and trust take a lot to build up, often years of working together, getting to know each other and understand each other. But they can be destroyed in an instant. When a relationship is fractured, when there is significant disconnection, it takes a lot of positive connection to rebuild it. That is the long, difficult path that now lay ahead for the relationship between the Board and the Faculty.

A less obvious lesson is how the unilateral action and the exercise of legitimate power can be disconnecting. At a very basic level, when someone or some group acts without consulting others who are impacted by that action, it makes it clear that there is no "we"

[20] I wrote the play "Junior's Sporting a Mohawk" with the intent of exploring trust and relationships between groups and how that might be different than relationships between individuals.

here. The fact that the Trustees had the right and even obligation to amend the bylaws as they saw the need didn't make it less disconnecting for the Faculty. Connection is in some way a felt sense of "we", or "we-ness". When the other acts unilaterally, it puts a lie to the fiction that we were a "we", that there was ever an "us". It shows that in some important way, you are you and I am me and that's that. It is an expression of a power asymmetry and is another way that power shows itself as the enemy of connection.

I think that leaders can mitigate the disconnecting impact of unilaterally exercising power and a lot of the conventional wisdom and popular management advice is about how to do this (even if it isn't put in these terms). A good consultation process in which those affected by a decision feel heard can help alleviate disconnection. Explaining why a decision was made to those who disagree with it, can also help alleviate disconnection. Clear boundaries about who is responsible for making which decisions can help. But even with all of these efforts to alleviate the disconnection, it is not an easy line for leaders to walk. You need to make decisions and act in a timely way and we all know that consultation processes can seem to stretch on forever.

So far in my story, I have mostly been learning about disconnection. I will turn to creating and enhancing positive connections in the next confession, but first a quick review of my thinking so far. Relationship and connection are deeply related or connected. Connection is the in-the-moment, felt sense of what exists between two people (or groups). Relationship is the larger context and in a structuration[21] sort of way, we can think of connection influencing the relationship and also the relationship influencing the connection. I use the term influencing because it is not straight forward or deterministic exactly how they influence each other in any general sense.

Power (dynamics, hierarchies, and differentials) can easily get in the way of and inhibit connection. One way that happens is through unilateral action which always communicates that we are disconnected and separate from the other. Leaders often need to take unilateral action, generally in the interest of efficiency and based in ideas of the unity of command. One of the reasons we have leaders in groups is so that someone will be able to take decisions and act when needed. Nonetheless, this is disconnecting and is perhaps the fundamental source of the loneliness of leadership. With great power comes great responsibility[22].

The opposite of unilateral action is working together – collaboration, teamwork, all those good things we in the management world talk about so much. Are they then fundamentally connecting? My hunch is that if done well they can be. And that is the subject of the next confession.

[21] An approach which dates back to Anthony Giddens' (1984) seminal work.
[22] Spiderman usually seemed lonely to me.

Confession 3. Making together.

Feedback from Faculty

It wasn't all gloom and doom. In early September after the first Business School meeting of the year, one of the Faculty sent me this note:

> Dear Steve,
>
> I just want to say thank you for taking on this difficult work of leading the Business School into the future (and now with a change of Provost!!! Hopefully that will make life easier for everyone on campus). I thought your introduction yesterday was well articulated and wonderfully honest. If anything, I would want to share on your behalf the incredible leadership experience you've accumulated as a playwright and director in the arts! The leadership dance of bringing everyone to a shared vision while honoring everyone's individual genius; giving feedback and managing delicate egos; wrestling with multiple forms of ambiguity—you have more experience in navigating the challenges of a Dean than most traditional leaders! And I'm so glad you have Diane, too—you are a great team together. Finally, I especially appreciate the collective creative spirit you are bringing to this strategy process!

Over the course of being Dean, I received several emails like that. Each time I felt a connection to that Faculty member. I think we all know that there is something powerful in being complemented, in having others see your work in the way you hope that it is seen. When my audience appreciates what I have done, it is like the warm feeling of applause when the curtain comes down after a show. We also know (or at least think we can tell) the difference between flattery and sincere and authentic appreciation. For my sense of connection, what is most important is the sense of resonance, the feeling that we are seeing things the same way. If the compliment is based in a different understanding – say for example someone tells me how funny something was when I didn't intend for it to be a joke – then I do not feel connected. In that first fall, I worked very hard on connecting with three different audiences: the Faculty and Staff of the business school, Diane, our Department Head, and the new Provost.

Working with faculty and staff

I had agreed to lead the effort to articulate our identity and strategy before I became Dean. This was in response to the now departed Provost not allowing the Business School to hire Faculty to replace those who had left and his assertion that this was because we didn't have a clear strategy. By July when I became Dean, it was also clear that we had a more pressing problem which was a large drop in graduate enrollment. Like many Business Schools, over the previous decade there had been two major trends for us. The first was a steady decrease in local working professionals who wanted to come to campus in the evenings to get a masters degree in Business. The second was a steady increase in the number of international students who wanted to come to the USA to get a masters. The increase in the number of international students from China and India who wanted to come to our university to get a STEM[23] certified masters degrees had resulted in steadily increasing enrollments, which the administration liked. The decrease in domestic part-time students had also changed the nature of the classroom experience. In less than a decade we had gone from teaching classes of working professionals with a few years of experience, to teaching classes

[23] The US government allows the graduates of Masters programs that are sufficiently technical to stay in the USA and work for three years after graduation rather than just one year for programs that aren't sufficiently STEMish, so these programs (which our specialty masters were) were in high demand.

that were dominated by full-time international students who lacked work experience and were not used to an American approach to graduate education.

The decline in enrollment of domestic masters students had been a concern of the previous Deans. The first Dean who had started back in 2010, had made the MBA program into a hybrid program in which classes were structured to be mostly online with two face-to-face residencies per semester. That worked well for a small subset of the market, but failed to attract large numbers of students. My predecessor had asked the question whether we should continue to offer an MBA program at all, with the Faculty answering, yes, what's a business school without an MBA? He had explored a variety of ways to attract additional domestic students with our limited resources and eventually gone all in on a contract with a marketing firm. The contract committed almost all of our marketing budget to the firm for the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 academic years. Spoiler alert, it didn't work. The election of Donald Trump led to a decrease in international students almost everywhere in the USA and by the fall of 2018 our international enrollments had fallen off the cliff. We were looking at missing our revenue target for graduate enrollment by roughly two and a half million dollars on a nine million dollar goal.

The drop in enrollment gave me a sharp sense of focus for the identity and strategy work. We needed butts in seats. It was really that simple. And that hard. After all, we sit in central Massachusetts and in every direction I look I see Business Schools that are much larger and have much more well established reputations. It is a crowded, even saturated market. We knew we couldn't compete on cost with the low-cost schools and we couldn't compete on reputation with the better known schools. We had to be different. Our strategic advantage was being part of a well-known tech school that had pioneered project-based learning for STEM students almost half a century earlier. That was what we needed to articulate.

The Faculty knew all of this deep in their bones. Many of them had been part of the Business School when it was a Department of Management and had first gotten AACSB accreditation in 2002 (the year I joined them). We had seen steady growth and recognition culminating in the being ranked as the best part-time MBA program in the country by Business Week in 2009. During that time we had a clear strategic focus on technological managers. My MBA leadership course was called "Leadership for Technological Managers". Many of the other courses were also "for Technological Managers". It was who we were and what we did. We somehow lost this articulation when we rebranded the new hybrid MBA in 2011 as "The Innovator's MBA". We tried to get it back when we rebranded the MBA in 2018 as the STEM MBA. All of which is to say that there was a common core and sense of identity to build upon and connect with.

In that way, the identity work was the group version of connecting with ourselves. Most of the work was done in small group meetings in which we talked about who we were and what we did best. They were open ended and consisted mostly of listening to each other. It was my job to connect the work of the different groups, to weave it together, share the results with the Faculty and Staff, listen to the feedback and then do it all again. Over the course of the fall, we created a document based in those discussions. I called the final document the management plan. It started with a two page statement about our identity and purpose that included the mission and vision we had developed. It also included twelve objectives, which were grouped into two major thrusts. For each objective we had developed a set of metrics that assessed how we were doing on that metric. The discussions about what those metrics should be were the most connecting that I (and many of the Faculty based on feedback I received) had. They required thinking deeply about what we were doing and what the result of what we were trying to do would be. They pushed us to a level of detail that meant we really were seeing things the same way. By January we had a document that articulated our identity and strategy. But it wasn't the document that connected us, it was the process of creating the document together that did that. The connection came from those group discussions, from the long, forced march from summer to winter in which we continually talked with each other, listened, put forward ideas, refined those ideas, and

eventually came to agreement. It wasn't strategy that connected us, it was strategizing that did.

The big lesson that I take from this is that power can be helpful in creating connection[24]. I used my power as Dean to convene groups, to set an aggressive schedule, and as needed, to make decisions so that we could move forward. But within that I worked hard to pay attention to how the process felt to me and as much as possible to everyone involved. Of course, it is impossible to really know how the process feels to everyone, but you can pay attention to the small clues that show up – the off-hand comments people make, the level of participation, the energy in the meetings. It is a use of power that I learned in my training as a theater director[25] and in the leadership world it echoes something of the feel of servant leadership.

I think the most critical balance is between my own ideas, my own sense of what we ought to do and everyone else's ideas. If I want the process and resulting documents to be "ours" rather than mine, then that has to be at the heart of the process the whole way. In theater, it is the tension between the artistic vision of the director and the artistic expression of the actors and designers. There is a real skill that the best directors have that merges the different artistic expressions together in a way where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. It is more than simply saying "Yes and" to every offer[26]. For me, it involves deep listening, trying to nurture the seeds and insights that individuals offering may not even recognize, and continually create and hold a space that allows for the creative expression at both the individual and group level. It is not easy and it is made all the more difficult by the fact that I hold power as the Dean, and I hold more ownership of the process than everyone else. All of the Faculty and Staff have other things to do, this process is not their primary job. But it is my job, it is the thing that I wake up thinking about on Saturday morning. And I am a creative person, so I have lots of ideas. It was easy to overwhelm the process with my own thinking, which I did on more than one occasion. When I felt that happening I tried to back off and re-create spaces for others, which mostly seemed to work.

The sort of connection that was created felt to me different than the sort of connection I tend to have with friends and family. This is an inadequate explanation, but it felt like it was based in something different. The connection I felt with my colleagues felt like it was based first and foremost in respect for each other. I saw them contribute something, whether that was small wording change or articulating a fundamental insight into who we are and what we were doing and saw them as caring about the group, working hard for the group, and contributing something that I could not have contributed. In short, in the process, the talents of my colleagues as intelligent, passionate people who were engaged with our common cause was very clear. That created a foundation of respect. Which isn't to say that I don't have respect for my friends and family, I do respect them. It is simply to say that connection I feel with friends and family comes from a different place. At its heart is the things we have in common and the love I feel for them. Which is not to say that I don't love my colleagues. I do love them. But that isn't driving the connections with them.

The connection I had with the staff of the Business School was also somewhat different than the connection I had with the Faculty. I was lucky enough to inherit a small and extremely competent staff that essentially ran the day-to -day operations of the School. They were all good at what they did, knew far more than I did about what they did and how the systems of the university and School actually worked. They cared deeply about the students and took care of them. So, I didn't work with them in any useful sense – they simply didn't need me. But we did work together in the sense that we were in the office together, we shared

[24] So far I have spoken primarily about negative aspects of power. But there is also a tradition that addresses the positive aspects of power (e.g. Sutherland, Gosling, & Jelinek, 2015).
[25] The book "The Illusion of Leadership" (Ibbotson, 2008) is an excellent description of the theater director as a leader.
[26] "Yes and" is one of the foundational values of theatrical improvisation (Johnstone, 1979).

casual moments together, they kept me informed me of what was going on and sometimes asked what I thought. The connection for me was to a great group of co-workers who I enjoyed being around. They had all known me as a Faculty member, but being Dean meant I spent a lot more time in the same spaces with the staff.

And there is a connection that comes from physical proximity. It is the connection that comes from looking out the window together and talking about what is going on with the construction of the new building, or talking about the news of the day, or even some nice gossip. It is the connection of living and doing the mundane tasks of our lives together. I don't know whether the staff felt a similar connection to me or not. It is one of the realities of being on the upper side of a power dynamic that you never know whether those you have power over laugh at your jokes because they are funny or because you are the boss.

Working with our Department Head

Respect as the foundation for connection was clearest to me as I worked to connect with our department head, Diane. She had been the director of the MIS (Management Information Systems) group when I arrived and was well respected on campus. She had won the Board of Trustees award for outstanding scholarship in 2014, which is given to one researcher at the university a year. I also had the experience of hearing her speak on various issues in department meetings over the years and I thought she was generally insightful and reasonable, so I certainly respected her as a colleague.

We were friendly with each other, but neither of us would have described us as friends. We didn't socialize and we didn't know each other very well. We are both introverts and not given to small talk, but beyond that we have little in common. Diane's idea of a great vacation is camping, while mine is a city break. I tend to rush forward with wild ideas, while she likes to think things through before acting. But we also both believe in evidence, reasoned arguments and being open to influence. I think that mutual respect, our different tendencies, and our willingness to listen all allowed for what became a great connection.

From the first moment when I spoke with Diane about her taking on the role of Department Head and me taking on the role of Dean, I spoke about it as a leadership team. The roles were different with a different focus, and even though the organizational chart showed the Department Head reporting to the Dean, I saw the Department Head as a peer and co-leader of the school. I recall an early discussion where I opined that if it ever came down to a situation where I had to unilaterally exercise power without her support, it would all be over – I would effectively be done as the Dean. So, in that way, it was very much a peer-to-peer relationship and there was effectively no hierarchical power dynamic to get in the way of connection. This was the only relationship I experienced as Dean where power didn't feel like it played a role in how we connected. Even with the Dean of Engineering and the Dean of Arts and Sciences, there was always a sense of where the three schools sat in the University hierarchy.

We worked together better than I would have thought possible. Our strengths and styles were complimentary. I would suggest some wild idea and Diane would think about it for a few days and then come back with ideas of what was possible and what wasn't in her understanding of the ways of the university. Where I tended to not see the political issues, Diane was well versed in them. We had very different social networks within the university to draw on. But above all else we listened to each other and worked together with what felt like no sense of ego or self. I didn't care whether it was Diane's idea or mine and I don't think she did either. Most of the time, what emerged wasn't clearly one or the other, but something that emerged out of our working together. In many ways, having that sort of partnership with Diane made leading the business school possible for me, because I didn't have to lead, instead we led. At its heart connection is about that feeling of "we".

Working with the Provost

I could work the connection with the Faculty and Staff and with Diane because I had an established relationship with them, having known them and worked together for many years. That was not true with the new Provost. He had come to our university from Princeton a couple of years previously to take the role of Dean of Engineering. When I first became Dean, we had lunch and we got on well enough. But we didn't really know each other. Our working relationship was made all the more difficult because we were both new to our role and were trying to figure out what the role really was. From the start, our relationship was very different than mine had been with the previous Provost. For example, the old Provost had liked to spend time building our relationship in non-work ways, such as the shoes and the Dean tie. The new Provost was much more about the work.

I learned that he had played rugby when he was younger because he had told a story about a rugby match to illustrate a point about strategy. I didn't volunteer that I had played rugby, I simply asked him what position he played. He didn't ask me about my relationship to rugby when I wore an All Blacks[27] hat into his office. Somehow because of the power dynamic, because he was my boss, I felt like I couldn't simply tell him that I had played rugby, that we had that in common, I needed him to ask me, to discover it for himself. I continued to make an occasional rugby reference in conversations with him, but it wasn't until I made an extended metaphor about how he led like a fullback (the position he played) that he finally asked if I had played and then what position. I think it might have added to the way in which he knew me to know that I had played flyhalf. But mostly, it didn't seem to create or enhance connection between us. Our connection (or lack thereof) was all about the work.

One of the things that made it difficult for me to connect with the new Provost was a way in which we were similar. He is a very creative and energetic idea guy. That is, he always has ideas about how to move forward, ideas about strategic directions we could move forward with that would solve our enrollment issues. This was different than the previous Provost, who had never suggested any particular approaches to me. The new Provost had been at Princeton during the time when their financial engineering program had had exponential growth. We had strong programs in math, industrial engineering, and computer science that could all play a part in a financial engineering program. And business analytics – the business school was already part of the data science program, which was growing rapidly, surely there was more to do there. The new Provost said that soon analytics would be part of all technical education in the way that calculus was today. He spoke elegantly about the fourth industrial revolution and could trace our university's role in the first, second, and third industrial revolutions and how each of those had shaped the university in its time. Harvard had just launched a dual MS in Engineering and MBA program. We could probably do that better than they did it.

He wasn't wrong with any of his ideas. But they weren't my ideas and I was used to being the idea guy. I think that I was happy to hear others' ideas as long as my ideas were also heard and maybe if I am being honest, if my ideas were playing a significant part of how we went forward. I did have ideas about financial engineering. Our Wall Street project center drew students and faculty from Math and Computer Science as well as the Business School. But it hadn't been doing as well in recent years after the Professor who founded it retired. There was certainly something there, but I didn't know what exactly it was or how to bring together the people who could make it happen. Frankly, I still don't. I agree that analytics was more than a fad or trend and would soon be integral to everything we did. That raised the question for me of whether we should jump on the Business Analytics band wagon (it

[27] The All Blacks are the national team of New Zealand and are generally regarded as the best team in the world. I also keep a framed Black Ferns (the women's national team of New Zealand) jersey in my office that is signed by Farah Rangikoepa Palmer, the legendary Black Ferns Captain, who I was lucky enough to meet when I was in New Zealand in 2013.

was too late to be a pioneer) or whether we should try to be a pioneer and just make analytics an integral part of all of our programs. It turns out the answer we eventually reached was to do both. So, it wasn't that we disagreed about the big ideas, the lack of connection was something else.

As I reflect back on our relationship in those early days, I think there were also two other things going on that made it difficult. The first was the issue of my own identity, my own ego I suppose. There was something in the way we communicated (or didn't) so that I often came away feeling like I hadn't been heard or that my ideas weren't good enough. I suspect that the Provost was just trying to offer suggestions and be helpful. I saw the issues as my problems to solve (except where I needed more resources which the Provost controlled) and I am guessing that he saw them just as problems to solve or even simply as opportunities. I am forced to wonder in my own interactions with people in the business school how often my own enthusiasm and ideas were overwhelming and disconnecting in the way I experienced that with the Provost. I never saw it, and I suspect the Provost didn't see it with me. I also realize that this dynamic has happened before in my life. When I was doing my PhD, I specifically didn't ask Bill Torbert to be my dissertation advisor because I felt his voice was very strong and would overwhelm my voice, which I was finding in the dissertation process. As a new Dean, I needed space and support to find my voice as a Dean. The Provost was also finding his voice as Provost and those two processes didn't initially come together well. Over time, they did and I think we gradually connected much better, but it took time.

The second thig that was going on, was the amount of time I spent following up on the Provost's ideas. I felt like I had to do due diligence on every one and that required a lot of work from me, much of which didn't pan out. There is a truism that says leaders, especially new leaders, often waste a significant amount of their subordinates' time with casual suggestions and comments, which the subordinates take as orders to be followed. I had this experience early in my time as Dean. One day, I was talking with my assistant and I told a story about being a guest speaker at IEDC Bled. I met with the President of IEDC and I was struck by how she had an entire closet in her office that was stocked with IEDC Bled branded gifts. There were chocolate bars and bottles of wine and coffee table books, all sitting neatly waiting to be given to visitors at the President's discretion. I thought I was just telling an amusing story, but a week later a case of branded wine showed up for me to have around to be given to visitors. It was the power of casual conversation from someone in power to be taken as a directive. I learned to be more careful about what I said. In that first fall, the Provost had not learned to be careful in that way, although I think he did over time.

Another way in which the connection was difficult was due to the level of abstraction we were working at in those early days. One of the things about craft is the concrete, particular, and detailed aspect of the work. When I watched two of my friends who were painters spend time in a studio together, the conversation does include some abstract ideas, but is also grounded in concrete particulars such as intense discussions about brush technique, which almost always quickly moves to doing and showing each other what they mean. I think that a critical part of craft is the way in which it is grounded in specific, physical practices. For leadership, it is easy to quickly get into abstract ideas and especially for those of us who write about and teach leadership it is easy to stay at a fairly high level of abstraction. For example, lots of recent work on leadership stresses the importance of being authentic, but what does that mean in practice?[28] Does being authentic mean blurting out every thought and feeling you are having as you are having it? I don't think anyone would experience someone doing that as "authentic leadership" or even name it as "authenticity". I can imagine the reactions might be more along the lines of, "do they have no filters at all?" or "will they never shut up?" or even "what is wrong with you?". However, in the moment, I

[28] Donna Ladkin and I raise this issue when we argue that authentic leadership is not as simple as just being your true self (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010), but is instead more complex than that.

could have a conversation with someone that was oversharing about what they had specifically said and in what ways that might be a useful way to be authentic and in what ways in might not. The particular, concrete details and context all matter in working on the actual craft of being an authentic leader.

So, as an example, when the Provost got excited about Harvard's dual MS in Engineering and MBA program, I needed to work out how we might do something like that and whether that would be possible. Our MBA program was designed for part-time professionals with little flexibility, while Harvard's is a two-year, full-time, residential program that has considerable flexibility in the second year. I spent time working through our requirements for the many MS in Engineering programs we offer and trying to work out how we could integrate that with our MBA program. I worked with Diane and our Director of Programs to figure out was possible so we could see if we could do something that might be attractive. I note that I didn't work with the Provost on that level of detail, nor did it ever occur to me to try and do that. It was clear to me that the Provost was busy and working hard with all of the schools in the university and that working on the details with him was not appropriate. Working with Diane and our Director of Programs we realized that we couldn't create a dual MS in Engineering MBA program that wasn't fundamentally just the two degrees taken at the same time (our going in assumption was that there needed to be an advantage to taking a dual degree program over taking the two degrees as they currently existed). We did realize that we could make a dual MS in Engineering and MS in Management program that might be very attractive. That working together enhanced my connection with Diane and with our Director of Programs. But it didn't help my connection with the Provost because it meant I had to explain to him that we couldn't do what he wanted us to do. I'm not suggesting that the Provost had a great need to have his ideas be the answer. I eventually came to believe that he had far less attachment to his ideas than most leaders and was happy to throw out a dozen ideas with the hope that one would work and the others would not. The lesson here for me is that for connection to be created, we needed to work together at a detailed and specific level, what I might call a level of "making together" rather than at a level of "thinking together".

I think there is something about making things that is inherently good for you[29]. Dick Richards[30] says "as the artist makes the art, the art makes the artist." I believe this process happens when we make anything as long as it is something we care about. When we make things together, we are also making connections with each other. The difference between making together and thinking together comes back to developing a shared understanding. When we have made something together and speak about it, the terms we use refer back to our common experience and we have confidence that we understand what we're talking about the same way. When we don't have that common experience, the terms refer back to our own experience and may mean something different to each of us. As an example, when I tell my leadership students that their assignment for class is to do an inquiry project and that they have to turn in a written report of the project, most ask me the same question, "how many pages is it supposed to be?" They haven't done a report for me and they are trying to make sure that what they have in mind for a report is the same thing that I have in mind. I try to give them a sense of what I want by saying, "I want you to cover your project in detail. Many students find this difficult, but I really think you should be able to do this in less than twenty pages." It's not the answer they want to hear, but after that conversation we are closer to a common understanding of what I mean by a report of their inquiry project.

I can tell my students that I am looking for a report that is less than twenty pages and that it's hard to cover everything in that length because I have been giving that assignment for

[29] Although, exactly what I mean by this is a bit of a mystery to me (cf Taylor & Ladkin, 2009), Claus Springborg (2018) has a useful explanation.
[30] In his book "Artful Work" (Richards, 1995).

several years. As a new Dean, I didn't have the experience of what the job was, so I wasn't very good at asking better questions. I think the Provost as a new Provost was in a similar place. Together, we tried to think together, we spoke in abstract language about "analytics" and "financial engineering" and bringing together engineering and business. But I don't know that either of us knew what we were really talking about in detail, so often it would turn out that we weren't talking about the same thing even though we were using the same words. I am happy to report that it got better and by the second year of working together, it felt to me like we connected better and more often. By the start of the next academic year, we had a plan that covered which new programs we would create, which programs we would modify, and even which programs we would look at phasing out. It also was spread out so the Faculty who had to do the real detailed work of program and curriculum development weren't overwhelmed. Over the next year and a half we did a pretty good job of following that plan, launching a new MS in Business Analytics and a revised MS in Information Technology for the fall of 2020 and a revised MBA for the fall of 2021. All three were based in a design that included three-course specializations that were interchangeable between the programs and all three were completely online. As I write this, I don't know if they will be successful, if they will solve our problem of declining enrollments and disappearing domestic students, time will tell.

Lessons

One of the enduring lessons from this for me is that how you get there matters to where you end up. That's a not a new lesson for me, but it is perhaps one that I need to relearn again and again. It's very clear to me as a playwright, that the process produces the result. That is, in the sense that a play is about change from an existing world to a new and different world, that new world is based in the values and actions of the change process. To put it another way, you can't lie your way to a world that values honesty. It's why it is so hard to fight your way to peace. In terms of connection, as a leader if I want to create an organization that has lots of high-quality connections happening between people, I need to do that in a way that is based in having high-quality connections between people. This was something I learned in theater. If the director created connection between themselves and the actors, and didn't also create connections between the actors, you didn't end up with a show where there was real ensemble acting happening. As a director I need to start with strong connections with the actors and then over the length of the rehearsal process, I have to nurture the connections between actors and gradually reduce the connection with myself. By the time we're ready to open the show, the director needs to be able to withdraw and let the actors go on their own. In the professional theater, the director's contract often ends on opening night.

It was easy to create connection with Diane as we worked together a lot, sometimes working on things together more than once a day. It was harder with the Provost because of the power hierarchy, the lack of existing relationship, the lack of making anything together, the infrequency (at most once a week) of even thinking together, and even the way our personal styles did and didn't fit together. And the connection with the Faculty and Staff required work, but by and large wasn't difficult. It involved making things together and I think it helped that I took on a lot of the grunt work of the making process. For the identity and strategy process that grunt work included scheduling and facilitating meetings, writing up the notes, writing first drafts and encouraging others to edit and change those drafts, setting up poles to get rapid feedback on mission statement options – you get the idea. The grunt work was everything other than coming up with ideas and insights. As much as possible, I tried to free all of the Faculty and Staff from having to do the grunt work, so that they could do non-grunt work, what I might call the artisan work of the process. This felt like a positive use of my power as the Dean, as their boss and leader. I suspect that many leaders and managers would suggest that there were better uses of my time, but here I disagree. This could just be me, but I got a lot out of being down in the weeds and working on the details of the making of our strategy and doing the grunt work was a good way for me to really immerse myself in the process and connect to everyone involved.

The second enduring lesson is almost the opposite, which is that where you get to matters. Making things together makes connection as long as the things you make are good. I say good to cover a wide range of attributes and allow for considerable personal variation, but for me good means that what we make together is something that I care about and feel good about the quality. I was proud of the strategy we made. I was also proud of the plan for curriculum revision that we eventually created with the Provost's help. In contrast, I can recall several strategy processes where I was not proud of the result. There is a form of strategy process where you put a group of key players in a room and "hammer out" a mission and vision. It is a grueling and exhausting process in which those with the loudest voice and most power have the most influence. It often involves ridiculous conversations around individual words and usually results in a consensus that everyone can live with and no one really loves. It is the reason so many organizational mission and visions statements are so bland and uninspiring. Those processes have never been connecting for me. Needless to say, we did not follow that process.

Throughout this discussion there have been hints and glimpses into deeper issues that affect connection – things like my own ego needs and sense of identity. I now turn to these and the importance of connecting to your self.

Confession 4. Fear Guru.

Facilitation

It was February 2019 at the winter meeting of the Board of Trustees. The President was kicking off a plenary session in which the Trustees, senior administrators, and a selection of Faculty members were about to discuss their hopes and fears for the By-Law Working Group process in small, mixed groups. She told everyone that the working group, which consisted of the President, the Provost, two Trustees, and four Faculty had started the process with an all-day meeting on Saturday 12 January, which she felt had gone well. She then thanked her "Fear Guru" who had facilitated that first meeting. Some people chuckled at the phrase "Fear Guru", some seemed puzzled by it, for most it didn't seem to be notable. I, on the other hand was slightly embarrassed by it, and more than a little bit proud to be publicly called her Fear Guru.

I first intellectually recognized the importance of fear when reading Bob Quinn's work[31]. In my years of teaching leadership to graduate business students I have found fear to be one of the greatest drivers of behavior and often a roadmap to the most impactful way to intervene into a situation and change the dynamics. Nonetheless, no one had ever referred to me as a Fear Guru before. Nor had I thought much about the role of fear in connection.

I started what became my role as Fear Guru when I had coffee with the President at her house on Christmas eve. It was pretty unusual to meet on Christmas eve when the university was officially closed, but the upcoming working group meeting on January 12th was weighing heavily on her and because this was more or less my field, she wanted to talk about how best to organize the meeting, given the existing distrust and disconnection that existed between the Faculty and the Board. It was not an exaggeration to say that the future of the university and certainly her future as President were at stake in this process. We spoke about whether to engage an outside facilitator or not and quickly agreed that there wasn't time to go through a process to find a facilitator that would be acceptable to everyone. We also agreed that the group needed to find a way to work together without outside facilitation in order to lay the groundwork for working together in the future.

I suggested that the first critical step was for each group (Trustees, Faculty, and Administration) to understand the larger dynamic that had happened with the bylaws and then that each group needed to understand and own their own contribution to that dynamic. Only when that groundwork was done could the group move forward and devise a process for working together that didn't replicate the existing problematic process dynamic. And only when they had a process that they believed could work, could they address the instrumental content issues of the bylaw changes. This was a lot to do in the four one-day sessions they had scheduled for the spring. The President seemed to largely agree with my assessment. Then she asked me if I would facilitate the first part of the day in the first meeting of the working group.

I got up early that January Saturday morning and drove from our home in New Hampshire down to the hotel in Massachusetts where the group was scheduled to meet for the day. I went over the plan in my head again and again during the ninety-minute drive. Part of my role as facilitator was to both create and hold a safe space for honest discussion. I also needed to do it in a way that was not dependent on me being there. Much like directing a play, I needed to connect with them and then separate from the group in a way that would help the work go forward when I left (which was planned to be around lunch time). My plan was to create some common language, a common understanding of what had happened by asking each group to tell their story of what had happened. I asked them to first tell the

[31] Quinn devotes a chapter to fear in "Change the World" (2000), which is excellent. I have also found finding and working with fear to be the critical element in Kegan and Lahey's change immunity process (2001a, b, 2009)

story of a smaller problematic interaction between the Board and the Faculty because I believed the dynamic was essentially the same and the issue was not quite as emotionally loaded. My intent was that by hearing each other's story we could jointly describe and name the overall system dynamic that played out again and again[32].

Although there were three groups, the main dynamic was generally understood as being between Faculty Governance and the Board of Trustees largely because the Faculty saw the administration as acting in concert with the Board. Although that wasn't always the case, it became simpler to describe the dynamic between the two groups. My intent was to get each group to see their own contribution to the problematic dynamic. Each group was acting from a deep love of the university and a passionate commitment to do what they felt was best for the future of the university, which made it more difficult to recognize their own culpability.

We listened to the Trustees tell their story of how their legal responsibility for the university forced them to act. They tried to work with the Faculty, but in the face of lengthy delays they had to act unilaterally. This raised a point of contention – the trustees' sense of time came from their experience in the business world where not acting for several months was generally not acceptable. For the faculty, who were used to considering issues over multi-year time frames a few months was not a long time – especially if some of those months were over the summer when Faculty on nine-month contracts were not officially employed by the university. After some back and forth with the Faculty, the Trustees could see how their own actions were perceived by the Faculty and why it was problematic. It felt like we were making progress and achieving some common understanding of the dynamic and perhaps even connecting a bit.

The progress slowed when we moved to listening to the Faculty's story. The Faculty were more defensive and worked much harder to convince everyone else that they were "right[33]", that they had acted in the best way possible, in the only way that was reasonable. Being Faculty, they were good at making reasoned arguments to support their position. I used every bit of facilitation skill I had and felt like I was not making any progress. I think there are a variety of reasons for why it was so much harder to get the Faculty to see their own contribution and own their own culpability in the problematic dynamic. I think the Faculty were much more invested. Their job as Faculty, their commitment to the university was everything for them, it was their entire professional and to some large degree personal identity. For the Trustees, even though they loved the university and were committed to it, it was not their whole life, nor a substantial part of their professional identity. There was also a power dynamic. When you are on the upper side of a power hierarchy, you can easily act as if there is no power dynamic. You can be vulnerable and open in part because you have the safety net of having power on your side if you need to use it. I don't think this is always a conscious stance, but it is there nonetheless. If you are on the lower side of a power hierarchy, you do not have that safety net. We are much more aware of power differentials looking up the power hierarchy than we are looking down them, so when you sit on the lower end of the power hierarchy it is always there for you. You can try to be open and vulnerable, but the awareness of the power hierarchy makes it that much more difficult. Again, this may often be subconscious, but it is there and is another way in which power can make connecting more difficult.

The discussion wore on and I had a sense of impending doom. I was going to fail as a facilitator, we weren't going to create the foundation for a successful process, it was all going to go to shit. We moved from talking about the smaller problematic interaction to

[32] For more on what I mean by naming the systems dynamic, see chapter six of "You're a Genius" (Taylor, 2014b)

[33] In the "Difficult Conversations" (Stone et al., 2000) approach, this is referred to as engaging in the battle of messages in which both sides argue for why they are right and the other side is wrong and is very common behavior. It also prevents us from resolving issues in a productive way.

talking about the creation of schools. We spoke about why it had taken so long for Faculty Governance leadership to be willing to bring a motion about creating schools to the Faculty meeting. One of the Faculty said that they couldn't bring it to the Faculty until they were sure it would pass. I asked why, what was the worst thing that could happen? The Faculty member blanched and started to talk about how embarrassing it would be for Faculty Governance, for the President, for the Board, for everyone, if the Faculty voted against a motion to create schools. I smiled to myself because for the first time all morning I saw fear. Real, honest to goodness, existential fear. And in that moment, I knew we would be okay.

From years of using the change immunity map[34] with my students, I have come to recognize fear as the most important data you can get about interpersonal interactions. Although we all have plenty of noble, laudable goals and ambitions, we also have many, deep-seated fears that are related to our sense of our own identity which can keep us stuck in unproductive behavioral dynamics. These fears are generally unconscious and even more importantly are taken-for-granted facts that are beyond question. As long as they lurk in the subconscious and are undiscussed and undiscussable, they exert an outsized influence on what we do. So, when I saw fear – and not just some casual, perhaps even rational and reasonable fear, but honest to goodness existential fear – I smiled and even relaxed a little.

Many of us react the same way to others' fear. We try to rationally examine it and show how it really isn't reasonable. And of course, it isn't reasonable, because these sorts of deep-seated existential fears are fundamentally irrational. They sound silly when we say them out loud. But saying they are silly and dismissing them doesn't make them go away. Even more importantly it doesn't help you connect with the person whose fear it is when you tell them how silly and irrational their fear is. It doesn't help them connect with themselves either. The fear is real and you can connect with others better by recognizing the fear, admitting to having some of that fear yourself (if you do), by welcoming the fear into the room and getting to know it. That was the path I took and as each group shared their own fears I could feel something happen. It felt to me like there was some connection happening and that maybe just a little they were beginning to accept each other as human beings, flaws, fears, foibles and all. There was still a lot of work to be done, but it now seemed possible to me.

I didn't go into that day thinking that we would get to fear. I had hopes that we could simply identify the existing dynamics and see how each group contributed to the problematic interactions. Fear moves the conversation from what is happening to why it is happening, which is usually much harder. But, it is also the place where the deepest connections can happen.

Befriending fear

Franklin D. Roosevelt said that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself. This captures our usual approach to fear. It is the stance that pushes us to deny that we are afraid, to hide any fear that we have, to tough it out and ignore fear if that is in any way possible. It is a stance that pushes us to disconnect from our fear and by doing so we disconnect from our selves.

I see fear as a large blinking sign saying, "here's something interesting!". Fear shows us a part of our self that is generally hidden away, unconscious, and inaccessible. Of course, that is not true with all fear, it is a particular type of fear that can lead us into deeper connection with our self. When I stand at the top of a cliff, look down at the rocks below and fear that I might fall and if I fall I might die or be seriously injured, that is probably a reasonable fear. When I'm playing golf and I say that I am afraid that I won't clear the pond with this

[34] This is a great technique for understanding why change is difficult (Kegan & Lahey, 2001a, b, 2009).

club, that is probably also a reasonable fear and neither of them are the sort of existential fear that I am talking about.

I say existential fear because it is a fear that threatens your very existence. Not generally your existence in a physical sense, but your existence in a psychological sense. The fear is about a threat related to your identity, your very sense of who you are. These are the fears where I worry I'm not good enough or worthy or love or countless other issues about who I am as a person. They aren't rational, they aren't conscious, and they work as undeniable facts for you. They generally come from somewhere, some experience, often some trauma when you were young, so they do have a basis or origin in fact, but they have expanded and become general rules that now apply in far too many places in your life. They are what Bob Kegan and Lisa Lahey call your "big assumption" and they are a part of us that we need to connect with in order to connect better with others.

As an example, let me tell you the story of an MBA student I had. We'll call him Bob. Bob had been in various leadership training programs during his time in the business world. He was intellectually convinced that part of being a good leader was being able to deal with conflict between people directly, which could mean talking about the conflict and engaging in conflict (which would hopefully be constructive) with others. He believed this and at the same time, he couldn't do it. He found that time and again, he avoided conflict, often at considerable cost to himself. We did some work to try and figure out what the fear was that was driving this behavior and where it came from in his life. He shared a story of when he was three years old and his parents were fighting. He was in the middle of the fight – literally. His mother had his arms and his father had his legs and they were pulling against each and arguing about him. From this, Bob learned that anger from people he cared about could literally tear him apart. He was afraid that if he expressed anger to people he worked with they would retaliate and the relationship would be destroyed and in some way, he would be as well.

Bob knew that his fear was irrational and he could point to many examples in his life that were disconfirming examples. But it was only by explicitly connecting to the part of his self that had that fear – some might say connecting to his inner three-year-old self, others might say coming to terms with his childhood trauma, and still others would have another name for it – he was able to take small steps and learn how to engage in conflict (generally constructive) with others. There are many traditions that engage in in this sort of connection to your self from Buddhist meditative practices to the Jesuit Spiritual Exercises to the advice of Ralph Waldo Emerson to "know thyself" to modern talk therapy practices. The common denominator is a commitment to a practice of reflection with specific techniques that is supported by masters of that practice.

My first experience of leadership development was as an undergraduate student in the Air Force Reserve Officers' Training Corp (AFROTC). We participated in drill (which mostly consisted of marching around) and classroom-based classes. We studied content about the structure of the Air Force, military history, and leadership. The leadership part was mostly academic theories of leadership. There was no intentional component of reflection about who I was or what fears drove me. The program did, however, trigger some accidental reflection. It was 1981 and there was a singular moment in class that I can still remember strongly. The Major was speaking to us and said this: "You're the president of the United States, you're in the oval office and you are told that the Soviets have launched a nuclear attack. The missiles are coming over the pole and in fifteen minutes most of the United States will be destroyed. You have two choices, push the button, and destroy the other half of the world, or don't push the button. If you don't push the button, you're in the wrong busines and you shouldn't be in the military." I knew right away that I wouldn't push the button. I didn't know why, but I was sure of that. I also knew that I was legally committed to serving in the Air Force when I graduated (since I was on an AFROTC scholarship).

Over the next year and a half, I was haunted by that moment. I reflected a lot on what I was willing to do as an Air Force officer and what I wasn't willing to do. I didn't think of it in terms of fear, but I was afraid that if I became a pilot (which was my plan), I would be ordered to drop a nuclear bomb and at that point it would be too late to object and if I refused I would be court martialed and sent to prison in Fort Leavenworth (this was the way my hamster wheel of a mind worked in my early twenties). I eventually declined the slot I had for pilot training and was given an assignment working in project management in weapons systems acquisition.

At least, that's how I framed it to myself. I found the noble fear – not wanting to drop nuclear bombs – and avoided the deeper, existential fear, one that I didn't want to acknowledge to myself or anyone else. It was a fear that I have never admitted to anyone right up until writing these words. It was the fear that if I went to pilot school I would wash out. I would fail. It was the fear that I wouldn't be good enough, that I didn't have "the right stuff". That was the deeper fear that I couldn't face. That was the part of myself I could not connect with. That isn't to say that the noble fear about dropping nuclear bombs wasn't real. It just wasn't the whole or even the most important part of the story.

It is these deeper, existential fears that I work to get my MBA students to identify and connect with. I have done this in the context of a required leadership course which I frame as being about working with the edge of your own leadership practice or in more practical terms, when and where is it the most difficult for you to be the leader you want to be and what can you do about that? We do a variety of exercises and use a variety of tools[35] to pursue this line of inquiry, but the tool that most directly raises and confronts the underlying fears is the change immunity map. It is a tool that can not only connect us to our self, but also to each other.

In late August of 2019, after the issues between the Board of Trustees and the Faculty had been more or less resolved the spring before[36], I was asked by the President's chief-of-staff what the Management Council might do at their upcoming retreat that would build on the work around fear that I had done with the Bylaws Working Group. I suggested doing a change immunity map session that would work on identifying people's fears that got in the way of MC being a high performing team.

When I went through the training to become a facilitator for change immunity map work, there seemed to be a tacit assumption that you would not be a part of the group you are facilitating. And of course, that is the usual way in which professional facilitators work – they come in from the outside. I had been trained to lead others through the change immunity map and structure it with sharing in small groups and having a select few people share with the whole group. With MC, I chose to also do the exercise myself as I was facilitating it – which was not something anyone had ever suggested to me and I suspect the vast majority of facilitators would advise against doing. I had done this a couple of times in the past and it had been very effective because it allowed me to model the behavior I was looking for. It was also a little scary because I never knew what exactly I would uncover about myself when I did the work. I just knew that if I could do the work properly, I would expose myself (in this case to my peers and to the Provost and the President) on Management Council in some way that I couldn't predict.

We started with the opening commitment of having the MC be a high performing team. I asked everyone to be a bit more specific about what exactly that meant they were committed to. For me, the commitment was to really listen to others and openly sharing my own views. I had the MC members seated at tables of 4 and they shared their work with

[35] My book "You're a Genius" (Taylor, 2014b) is my how-to guide for this course.
[36] That is, changes to the bylaws had been agreed to by everyone and a process for working together going forward had been created, so a new normal had been created.

each as they completed each column of change immunity map. The second column was a list of things they were doing or not doing that ran counter to the previously identified behaviors. I named that I was not always open with my views, that is I didn't always share what I was thinking when it differed from what seemed to be the main steam view in the room. In the third column, upon some reflection, I identified that I did that because I was afraid that if I disagreed with the President she wouldn't love me. I could feel this horrible knot in my stomach when I said it. I was tempted to say she wouldn't like me, but I could feel that it was love from the President I was afraid of losing. I was aware that the President and I were not really close. I liked her and I think she liked me. I admitted to the room that I hadn't realized I so desperately needed the President's love and everyone laughed. The President said that she loved me and everyone laughed and we moved on. It took a lot more reflection for me to realize that my relationship with the President, as my primary female authority figure was bringing up things from my relationship with mother, but I won't go into that because that's not my point here. The lesson from this was that sharing our deep existential fears is connecting. Based on things that people said to me over the next few weeks, that moment and the change immunity map exercise was connecting for people – to their own self, to each other, and to me.

As often happens with team building exercises, the initial effect faded over time. There was some lingering awareness that fear was important (the Provost occasionally mentioned it), but over time the felt sense of working with fear faded because there was no continuing practice within the group. One of the lessons of craft in general is that ongoing practice is critical and without it, first you get rusty and eventually skills can atrophy completely. After thirty years of not playing the trombone, I still intellectually remember what I am supposed to do, but I can't make my mouth do what is needed to play the notes – the embodied skill is gone.

Connection to place

I also note that my fear that the President wouldn't love me is not just data that helps me connect to me, it is also data that helps me connect to place. I don't think I have had that fear with other female leaders I have worked for over the years. It begs the question (as do all of our reactions really), why in this time and place, why now, why here? What is it about being Dean in this place that is different than when I have worked for other female leaders? My guess is that it is tied to having a sense of the university being my home – I have worked there for almost twenty years and I anticipate working there until I retire. I say this knowing that I have never held another job more than two years. My mother was the female leader of my home growing up and I think that is what is resonating for me when I feel the need for the President to love me.

Connection to place is important and easy to lose touch with in modern western society. When I have interacted with indigenous cultures, such as the Maori in New Zealand or the Blackfoot in Banff I am struck by how important and foregrounded their connection to place is. In November 2017 I had the honor of participating in a series of dialogues with the Blackfoot researcher Leroy Little Bear about the nature of connection. He did not share my interest in connection, largely because connection for him was the essential nature of the world. He was connected to the mountains, to the place, to the elk in the woods, to his ancestors, to everything in a fundamental way that simply was. My interest in connection was based in an error of my understanding of the world that we were separate from other people, that the mountains and land were inert and dead and not connected to us. This idea that we are all connected and our separateness from the rest of the world is an illusion occurs in many spiritual and philosophic traditions. But as true as I have come to believe that to be, the illusion is strong within me and within my world and it takes considerable work to overcome it.

I think of connection to place in two distinct ways. The first is the way a place, or more broadly a particular context, resonates with my own history. This is the way that the

university environment resonated with my experience of home and leads to my need to be loved by the President. Places don't have the same resonance for everyone. I grew up in southern Ohio in what was a part of Tornado Alley. We had regular tornado drills in school. In 1974, a tornado destroyed the nearby town of Xenia, Ohio and I saw the absolute destruction that a tornado can bring. My wife grew up in Massachusetts where tornados are rare. One day she commented on how beautiful and unusual the sky was. For me, that sky made my blood run cold and the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. It was a tornado sky, that sort of yellowish, purplish color that comes with tornados. In that moment, we had very different connection to place.

There are also connections to place that aren't based in our personal history. I had that connection to Banff, the very first time I went there. It felt important and powerful to me in some deep way that I didn't understand. And many strange and powerful things have happened to me while there. I have come to believe that this is the nature of Banff – it is a uniquely powerful place. And not just for me. My friend Nick Nissley was told when he moved there that the indigenous people had never lived in Banff. They had come to Banff to trade and meet with each other, but it was too powerful of a place to live. No one lived there until the Europeans came.

And even though some places just feel powerful or special, we can connect to place anywhere. For me it makes a difference in how I am able to be in a space if I take the time to connect to it first. As an actor and as a teacher I believe it is important to spend time in a place and get to know it before I perform or teach. I spend time simply being in any room I teach in before I teach there. I don't have any clear intellectual explanation for why that matters to me, but I do know that when I have connected to the space, I feel more grounded and thus more able to connect to myself, which in turn opens up more possibility for connecting with other people.

I don't have any empirical data to point to on this, but I do have a strong sense of the importance of connecting to place. Several years ago I taught an experimental course in environmental management. The first time I taught it, we met outside and it felt like it was easy for the students to connect to the natural world. The second time I taught it, we met indoors in a classroom and it felt to me like the students didn't connect to the natural world in the same way. The class didn't work as well.

All of which suggests to me that there are non-fear related ways to connect to both place and to our self. Most spiritual practices, from meditation to prayer seem to me to be about connecting to our self and to the bigger world. Given how prevalent that these practices have been throughout human history, I believe that it is not just me that believes connection to self and place are an important foundation for acting in the world, for connecting with our fellow humans.

Fear plays an important role for any leader working connection. Fear can easily be disconnecting, from each other, from ourselves, and from the place where we are. But it can also be valuable data in understanding that disconnection and working to overcome it and even craft it into connection. As we understand others' fear, even though we may not have that same fear and thus we don't see things the same way the other person does, understanding that fear provides a basis for empathy. We may not see things the same way, but we can have a sense of how they are feeling and recognize that we have experienced that sort of feeling. Understanding our own fear may open the door for us to have empathy for our self and thus better connect to our self.

Fear points us to a deeper level of our own and others' experience. Whether we call it the unconscious, or tacit embodied knowing, or even aesthetic experience, it is a level that exists below or prior to our intellectual experience. There is much to be said about connection at that deeper level, which I turn to in the next confession.

Confession 5. Feeling it.

Holding hands

It was Saturday morning, 19 September 2020. I had gotten used to doing Dean things on the weekend, but this was something different. I went to one of my faculty's house for a brunch. Her husband had arranged the brunch because she was ill and he thought she would like to see her colleagues. I had become aware that she was sick in late August when I tried to reach her because we hadn't heard whether she wanted to be on campus in the fall[37] and her husband answered her phone. He told me that she was in the hospital and that the preliminary diagnosis was auto-immune encephalitis. We scrambled and found people to cover her teaching for the fall and I supported him in filing the medical leave paperwork. I had read everything I could on auto-immune encephalitis, but I was not prepared for that morning. She was sitting at a table. She couldn't speak. When I sat with her she took my hand and held on to it. I fumbled a few words about how much we all missed her. After a while a neighbor came by and she took their hand. When I spoke with her husband, he told me that the diagnosis was Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD) and the prognosis wasn't good. CJD is progressive and always fatal. She died within a month.

Sitting there holding her hand I felt a very strong connection. We weren't doing anything together, we weren't seeing anything the same way – in fact over the 18 years we had been colleagues, we saw things differently more often than not – and yet, the feeling of connection was undeniable. It was a very human-to-human, full-on connection. I don't have any way of knowing what she felt in that moment or even how much she was really still there. But my sense was that she was there, she was fully present and that horrible disease had stripped away all pretense, any agenda, or power dynamic, or anything else that so often gets in the way of connection. She was just fully open in the moment and I was overwhelmed by that. I felt the full rainbow of emotions, grief, pain, joy, gratefulness, and others I have no words for.

The felt experience of connection

I think that connection is first and foremost an aesthetic experience[38]. That is to say that it is something I feel rather than something I understand or something I perceive. That isn't to say that I can't experience connection based in intellectual understanding, as an academic I experience intellectual connection (and intellectual disconnection) frequently. But even that intellectual connection – say for example when we have the same love for the ideas of John Dewey – is something that is felt.

In order to think about the implications of connection being fundamentally an aesthetic experience, we need to start with a model of how humans interact with the world[39]. There are many different ways of talking about this, but across many fields[40] I am seeing something of a convergence that is grounded in modern neuroscience research. What follows is my own synthesis and summary.

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[37] In the fall of 2020, the COVID pandemic was still raging and we were bringing students back onto campus. So, we had asked all the faculty if they wanted to be on campus and be COVID tested regularly and teach a hybrid face-to-face and online class, or if they didn't want to be on campus they could teach fully online and work from home, Both options were fine, but we needed a clear decision for one or the other.

[38] This use of the term aesthetic comes from the work of Baumgarten (1750/1936) who argued in response to Descartes' saying "I think therefore I am" that we also know things directly through our senses and the term for that sensory knowing is aesthetic. It may be helpful to think of the opposite of aesthetic, which is anaesthetic – the stuff that is used in surgery so that you have no feeling.

[39] An example from my own work is our model of "Institutional Aesthetics" (Creed, Taylor, & Hudson, 2020).

[40] For example, a physicist might describe this in terms of a complex system that minimizes uncertainty and can be described with a Lyapunov function, while a philosopher might invoke arguments from Descartes to Baumgarten and Vico to Nietzsche.

As a starting point, we receive information about the world through our senses – that is we see, hear, touch, taste, smell, and sense what is happening around us. The first thing that happens is that we pay attention to some sensory information and not to other information. What we pay attention to is based in existing patterns of information we have about what is important, what matters and how it matters. Some of these patterns may be innate, but most are learned. The pattern tells us what something *is* in the sense that it provides an initial meaning of the sensory data. We then have an emotional reaction to that meaning, which often may move us to act. Based in the emotional reaction, we make cognitive sense of the sensory data – that is we tell ourselves a story about what is going on and what it means and what we should do. That cognitive understanding may then move us to act if we haven't already. Our actions (or lack of action) are followed by more sensory data and the cycle continues. In reality, all of this is happening at almost the same time and we are generally only aware of what our emotional response was and the cognitive story. We are generally not aware of the pattern matching part, which is what I think of as the heart of the aesthetic experience, largely because it simply *is* to us. Let me try to make this a little clearer with an example.

The person seated next to me speaks. I hear the sound, I see them speak. I immediately find a pattern that tells me that they are speaking Portuguese. I don't speak Portuguese, so I could easily be wrong, but my mind has taken the available sensory information – the sounds I hear coming from them, the look of the person, the fact that we're sitting at an airport waiting for a flight to Lisbon – and ignored a whole lot of other sensory information – how hot it is, what I'm wearing, and so on forever – and matched it to my pattern of what I think Portuguese sounds like. I have no emotional reaction because I am pretty sure they are not speaking to me. I tell myself the story that it all makes sense because of where we are and what I hear and smugly feel rather proud that I know what is going on. Let's look at another example.

The person seated next to me speaks. It is a colleague who has just said, "no disrespect intended, but" as the start of a lengthy comment in response to the proposal I have just laid out. My eyes squint a little and I unconsciously draw back the corners of my mouth, just a little. I have taken "no disrespect intended" to mean that I am about to be very disrespected. There's something about the combination of my past history with this colleague, the way they have said it, and the use of the phrase itself that quickly match a pattern I know well. It feels like they have offered me a chair to sit in, but they are about to pull the chair out from under me as I sit and then everyone will laugh at me as I fall on my butt. I am a little angry (in advance for what they are about to do to me) and I tell myself the story that nothing means "I am about to disrespect you" more than saying "no disrespect intended". I laugh to myself at how clever I am for knowing this. It's something of a mental smirk in my internal dialogue with myself.

There are other meanings I could have taken away from "no disrespect intended". If a different colleague had said it or if it had been said by a friend at dinner, I might have understood that it was meant to be ironic and humorous. And I really don't know how my colleague intended it, I only know the meaning I took from it. The patterns that are available to me have been developed over a lifetime in a variety of organizations, from my family to peer groups, to working environments. In those organizations I learned what things mean and I have now internalized those meanings. I call the collection of those patterns my personal aesthetic because it is how I interpret and make judgments about the world around me. The difference in our personal aesthetics is why one particular building is beautiful to me and another is ugly[41] while you may see them in the exact opposite way. But it is the same fundamental process and mechanism that determines whether I immediately feel my colleagues "no disrespect" comment as an impending attack or an ironic joke.

[41] For example, I think the Gropius House in Lincoln, Massachusetts is beautiful and Boston City Hall is ugly.

Remember my former student Bob in the last confession? He had a very strong personal aesthetic that found strong negative emotion and conflict repulsive. Many people have a similar aesthetic. But, you could have an almost opposite aesthetic. When I was an undergraduate student, I lived in a fraternity house that had a shared aesthetic around arguing about technology. We spent many evenings sitting around in groups arguing about how technology worked. For example, one of my fraternity brothers once asked how we thought the track ball in Missile Command (a popular video game of the time) worked. He had seen the inside of a Missile Command game and knew the answer. The result was hours of intense argument in which people put forward ideas and others shot them down. It was conflict and I have no doubt that Bob would have found it intolerable. We loved it.

I think the aesthetic was our version of shaming the meat[42]. For our egalitarian culture, it was important that no one was better than anyone else. And the larger university engineering culture had made us all used to being wrong as class average on exams was typically lower than 50%. So, we argued and tore each other's ideas apart and enjoyed it. I know that I didn't have the same love of arguing when I was in high school. I also didn't have many friends in high school who would have enjoyed arguing about technology and even those who would have knew that doing so would mark us as nerds in the larger high school culture, something we tried (largely unsuccessfully) to avoid.

The shared experience of living together in the fraternity still connects me to my fraternity brothers. The arguments about how technology worked was only one aspect of the shared culture and as I look back I know that our many shared experiences provide a powerful base for ongoing connection. But we don't have to have done things together to have shared experiences. For example, when I was Dean, my chief-of-staff was a retired Air Force officer. He had retired as a full Colonel, while I had separated as a Captain and we had not served at the same time. He had served multiple tours in Afghanistan and I had flown a desk in Florida and Massachusetts, but we did have a common experience of being Air Force officers. I remember saying to him, shortly before I stepped down from being Dean that "I was trying hard not to be too FIGMO[43]." He laughed and I knew that he knew exactly what I meant. That was a small moment of felt connection made all the more powerful by the fact that I also knew that my other colleagues wouldn't know what I meant by that.

Although this felt experience of connection is not about seeing the world the same way in an intellectual way, it is still about common experience, it is still about a resonance in the sense that the two of you are vibrating at the same frequency. This can be very literal. As an example, it can mean simply breathing together. Donna Ladkin[44] suggests a simple exercise for connecting with other people by matching their breathing. It may sound silly, but it can be a very useful and profound experience. One of the first times I did this was the first time I met the President of my university. It was her first day on campus as President. I was meeting with her as one of a group of three faculty from the Business School who had scheduled the meeting to make the case that hiring a new Dean of the Business School (who would become my predecessor) was time sensitive and should happen as soon as possible. The three of us had planned the order we would speak in and we intentionally had me go last. We also intentionally arranged for me to sit closest to her in the meeting so I could focus on matching her breathing. When the meeting started and I matched her breathing, it was shallow, up in her chest, and a little quick. As I breathed like that with her, I could feel her nervousness. But not just that she was nervous, but how that nervousness felt, the particular coloring and texture of that nervousness. Fairly quickly her breathing slowed and became deeper as she relaxed. That slower deeper breathing felt very

[42] Shaming the meat is a social leveling mechanism amongst the !Kung and is similar in function to the Danish Jante laws.
[43] FIGMO is slang for the attitude you have when you have already received your orders for your next duty assignment and you don't care very much about your current assignment.
[44] In her chapter on breathing (Ladkin, 2014) in our co-edited book on the physicality of leadership.

authentic to me. I felt like she was believing us and actually cared about what we had to say. I felt real connection with her.

Breathing together is a very direct way to at least partly feel what the other person is feeling. Or in other words it is path towards establishing some physically based empathy with the other person. I suspect that empathy is critically important for felt connection at least in the sense that not having empathy for the other probably prevents you from feeling connection to them. Empathy alone may not be sufficient to feel connection, but I know of no better path. For me, this is why empathy is so important for leadership. There are of course other ways to feel empathy – it is fundamental part of what it is to be human and we are all hard-wired to feel empathy for others. For me it is as simple (and difficult) as being open to the other person in all they bring. Former US President Bill Clinton famously responded to a heckler, "I feel your pain" in what for me was an example of what empathy can do for a leader. He was being attacked and seemingly managed to put aside his own sense of being attacked and responded in a way that was potentially connecting. The cynic in me wants to say that Clinton's statement was rehearsed and was really meant to be performative rather than a sincere act of human connection. But even if it was, it highlights both how difficult it can be to be empathetic and connecting when others disagree with us and how powerful it can be to overcome our natural fight, flight, or freeze tendencies and draw on our empathy to connect.

Most of us have probably not and are unlikely in the future to spend much time consciously breathing with others. But we all laugh with others. Laughter with others can be very connecting. There is something infectious about laughter, so much so that we have probably all had the experience of others laughing causing us to laugh when we don't really know why we're laughing. Laughter is very much a felt sense and it usually dies when we try to intellectualize it, when we have to explain a joke or why something is funny. I have come to think that there are distinctly different ways in which laughter is connecting.

The first is the precept that I learned as a playwright that comedy is for subjects that are too difficult or serious to be able to address with drama. This seems counter intuitive, but I know there is profound truth in this precept. This plays out in interactions with others far more often than we are generally aware of. How often has someone said something and then laughed to indicate that it wasn't serious and yet part of you knew that it really was serious in some important way? We laugh to indicate that we aren't being hostile or aggressive when in fact that's exactly what we're doing, we just don't want the people we're talking to to respond as if we're being hostile or aggressive or behaving in some other way that tends to be disconnecting. It is a form of conversational jujitsu that is meant to look like a simple, humorous comment, but is actually doing the double duty of delivering an important serious message that might not be well received while pretending that it isn't doing that. Taken to the extreme, this is the basis of insult humor. It's just a joke, right? It just makes clear what the power hierarchy is and where each of us stands in it, right? It's why humor that punches down the power hierarchy isn't really very funny and many of those on the receiving end still laugh at it. I'm not laughing *at* you, I'm laughing *with* you, right? It's connecting because it's funny, rather than being disconnecting and nasty if it were said seriously. All of which is not to say that this is done consciously. Like much of what we do as social creatures interacting with others it is subconscious, albeit learned behavior. Even our comprehension of the serious message may be largely subconscious.

The second is the form of joke structure. I talk about joke structure versus play structure when I teach playwriting. The difference is where the change takes place. In a play, we watch the protagonist change, whether they grow, they learn, they are crushed, in some fashion they change. In a joke, it is the audience that has to change. The classic joke structure is the setup implies a particular framing and then the punch line is based in a different framing which is compatible with the setup and we the audience have to change how we understood what was going on. As an example, Henny Youngman famously said, "take my wife, please." The setup is "take my wife" which we understand as the lead in to

his wife being an example of something. The punch line, "please" changes our understanding as we realize he is asking for us to literally take his wife. The punch line framing is surprising and funny, in part because it is surprising, but also because it defies norms in some fashion, but generally it doesn't defy norms too much. I think that this sort of shift connects us to others in a couple of ways. The first is the very simple way in that we get it. We understand why it's funny and immediately got it, so that is a way in which we make sense of the world the same way. The second way is that we (the joke teller and the audience) are sharing in something that is slightly transgressive, slightly naughty. It means we are in on the joke, part of the in-the-know group with the other. That sort of in-group feeling is a feeling of connection. On the flip side of that is the disconnection we can feel when we don't get the joke, or get the reference or in some other way recognize that we aren't part of the in-the-know-group, which can feel pretty horrible.

As I continue to think about the felt nature of connection it is important to recognize that this sort of experience is not simply subconscious or tacit thought that can be made explicit and worked with in the same ways that we work with intellectual knowing. It is a fundamentally different thing than intellectual knowing. As we saw with laughter, it is not constrained by logic nor are contradictions and paradoxes problematic within our felt experience (although both can be problematic as we try to intellectualize it). The felt experience can be both connecting because of the laughter and disconnecting because of the serious message contained within the joking statement at the same time.

When I was in high school, I took a class in arranging music for jazz bands. One of the things we learned was the structure of the blues scale – the root, the flatted third, the fourth, flatted fifth, fifth, seventh, and finally the tonic. You could play those notes in any key and it sounds like the blues. That's an intellectual, structural description of the blues. And it's right as far as it goes. But it's not the essence of the blues. As an upper-middle-class, privileged, white kid in suburban Ohio, I didn't get the real essence of the blues. I didn't get the expression of pain and sorrow, the feeling that sits at the core of the blues. I liked the blues a lot. And I could use my intellectual knowledge of the blues scale to improvise music that sounded bluesy. But it wasn't the blues. It didn't have the felt essence of the blues, it was only a technical, intellectual imitation of the blues.

There is a similar risk as I write about connection. All of this cannot help but be an intellectualization of connection, not just because I am an academic and have a strong tendency to intellectualize everything, but because the form I am using is based in intellectualization. If I had written a novel, a play, or a collection of poems I might have been able to show you the felt experience of connection. And of course, the reason I start confessions with a vignette (or a cold open if you prefer) is to try and show something of the felt experience. But once, I shift from showing to telling and analyzing I have moved from the aesthetic experience to an intellectualization of it. With that movement there is the risk that I will convey the structure of the blues, but not the essence. My concern is not that you don't know the essence of connection. I believe that humans inherently know what it is connect with others. The concern is these ideas about connection will be used to create and work with a technical imitation of connection that lacks the depth of real felt connection. The cynical part of me thinks that most of management advice and interpersonal skills training is based in teaching technical imitation without recognizing that's what it's doing and I don't want to do that. This may be a work of technical description and analysis and in a very important and critical way, that is not connection. What is connection then? As a musician once said to me in response to a similar question about the blues, "if you have to ask, you aint never gonna get it."

Impact versus intent

For me, one of the great insights from thinking about the felt nature of connection is what it tells us about what may be the most common form of felt disconnection, what "Difficult

Conversations[45]" refers to as separating (or not) impact from intent. The idea is based in the simple observation that when we interact with others, we all have a strong tendency to assume that the other person's intent is whatever the impact of what they said and/or did had on us. Although, sometimes the impact on me may match the other person's intent, more often than not (and especially so when the interaction doesn't go well) their intent is very different than the impact it has on me. Recognizing that impact and intent are often different is what "Difficult Conversations" refers to as separating impact and intent. The discussion in this confession provides an explanation for why this is often so very hard to do.

Both our intent and the impact are based in the person's personal aesthetic, that pattern that provides the initial meaning of the sensory information. Because we are generally consciously unaware of our personal aesthetic and take that initial meaning as a given truth, our first reaction to someone else having a different understanding is that they are wrong. When I try to help someone and they are offended because they feel like I am telling them that they are wrong (or stupid or somehow lesser), my instinct is to say that they are wrong, they misunderstood what I said. If only I could be a little clearer or if they were perhaps paying a little better attention they would understand what my intent was because it is a taken for granted truth for me. The same is true when I feel attacked and the other person says they weren't attacking me, I don't believe them because I felt the attack. The greater the difference in our personal aesthetics – which are the product of our own history and all the organizations and important others we have learned from – the greater chance we will make meaning differently and feel disconnection.

I have come to believe that the ability to separate impact and intent is the single most important skill I can teach my students. It is conceptually simple, but difficult to internalize and incorporate into your moment-by-moment interactions with others, especially when emotions are running high. It requires an ability to distance yourself from your self and watch what you are doing in real time. That requires a lot of mental complexity and an ability to hold multiple perspectives about what is a happening at any one time. It may also be the key to the second insight this line of thinking brings to me which is how do we work and build connection when we disagree?

The recurring theme in my understanding of connection is that it is based in common understanding or common experience – a resonance of seeing things the same way. Yet, when we disagree we are by definition not seeing things the same way, whether that is individual actions in a problematic encounter with another person or the larger organizational strategy and tactics in response to the environment and mission of the organization. The critical question for leaders then is how do we work connection in those times when there is fundamental disconnection. The idea of separating impact from intent offers some advice. The "Difficult Conversations" approach describes a detailed set of steps that starts with inquiring into how the other person understands things and then sharing how you understand things. The idea is that if we can both understand why the other understands things the way we do, we will create some common ground for moving forward. Even more importantly, we can both own our own contribution and see how the others' position is not unreasonable. It is a path towards empathy and understanding at a deeper level. This sort of movement is common in the management literature. For example, "Getting to Yes"[46] suggests that in negotiations we need to move past positions to the interests that are underneath those positions.

This suggests to me that the meta-move for a leader is to work a deeper felt connection, while also being clear about the issues around which there is disagreement. This was the move at the heart of recognizing that both the Board of Trustees and the Faculty

[45] For me, a true classic (Stone et al., 2000).
[46] A classic of modern negotiation (Fisher et al., 1981).

passionately loved the university. It didn't instantly establish connection, but it felt to me like it started to create a space where listening to each other wasn't completely based in disconnection. I think this is also the way I would describe Clinton's "I feel your pain" reply to the heckler. He is trying to move to a deeper place of felt connection even if there is clear disconnection around the best way to deal with that pain. Again, I don't know how well it worked, but it is the only real answer I have to the question of how you work connection when we disagree.

To talk about a deeper connection suggests that one of the characteristics of connection is depth. I'm not sure depth is really the right term, but it does at least point in the right direction. Connection can be more or less visceral, more or less felt deeply. That is not to say that it is inherently stronger if it is felt deeply, but rather that it is different than a more cognitive and explicit connection. Both can be very strong, or rather weak, but they are different in some ways. The felt connection is harder to articulate. It often comes from shared experiences, such as having been part of the same group – whether that is family, the military, ethnicity, where you're from, or something else. But it may not come from anything you can identify, it may just be something you felt – that sense of "we just clicked right away" or "it was like we'd always known each other" even though you had just met.

Of course, as I have suggested earlier in this confession, the felt connection has an impact on the cognitive connection and visa versa. My sense is that felt connections are critical for longer term relationships, while cognitive connection is more important for task-based connection, for accomplishing things together. But again, the relationship is the ground that the in-the-moment connection is built upon and the in-the-moment connection builds the relationship.

If felt connection largely comes from shared experiences and is difficult if not impossible to articulate, this raises the question of how do I as a leader work that connection? How can I create, enhance, or even destroy that sort of connection? I think the answer is that you can work that connection by referring to it. When I used military slang with my chief of staff, I was reinforcing the connection of us both having been military officers. When I used an extended rugby metaphor with the Provost I am trying to make him aware of what might be the felt connection of us both having played rugby. And of course, I can pay attention to the experiences of the current moment that might feel like they are connecting us and thus could be a basis for felt connection going forward. And again on the flip side, it is easy to destroy connection by not paying attention to the moment, with unintentional (and often unthinking) micro-aggressions, or even just trying to connect in an awkward way that doesn't work.

At its root, my sense is that felt connection is based in a sense that we have experienced and felt the same things as the other person. That could be that we have had the same experience of growing up in the same small town or perhaps have had the same experience of being an outcast in high school or serving our country. It is the way in which you know how it feels in the same way that I know how it feels.

Confession 6. Physicality of connection

Fingertips

It's June 2004. I am standing on the main stage of the Eric Harvie Theatre at the Banff Centre in Banff, Alberta. My eyes are closed. I have one arm extended with my index finger out touching my partner's index finger. She also has her eyes closed. In dead silence, we start to move, staying connected through our fingertips and only our fingertips. Around the edge of the stage stand the rest of the class in the art of executive leadership. Their job is to keep us safe and make sure we don't move off the stage or run into anything. We move forward, backward, sideways, guided only by the physical sensation of our fingertips. I don't know whether I am leading or following. And I realize that it doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is that we are connected and it is both frightening and wonderful.

Outside-in

In the previous confession I was talking about the way in which connection is felt, the embodied experience of feeling connection with others (or your self or even the place where you are). Here, I move from that "inside-out" felt experience and think about physicality and the "outside-in" experience[47] of connection.

I have done the fingertip touch with eyes closed exercise with lots of different people[48] and it is always fascinating to watch. It is the closing exercise in a series of exercises that is designed to explore the felt sense of connection. Some people take control and pull and push the other around the space. Others give up control and are happy to be pulled and pushed about. Most take turns in a way where it is fairly clear to those watching who is leading whom. After a few minutes of connected, eyes-closed movement, we stop and I ask them what it was like. Interestingly, their description from the inside is often fairly different than what I have seen watching them. I have seen someone carry so much tension in their finger that their knuckles turn white and they are completely unaware of how hard they are trying to hang onto the physical connection. I use this exercise to get people talking about their own experience of connection and leadership and everything that happens is useful grist for the mill.

The next step in this physical experience of connection is to work with status[49] exercises. I approach status interactions as the micro-dynamics of power and the exercises are meant to bring out the ways in which doing status moves (raising or lowering your own status or raising or lowering the other's status) prevents real connection from happening. Although there are many ways in which we can do status moves, from how we dress to name dropping people we know, places we go, and things we do, I try to focus on the physical ways in which we do status. As an example, I might ask about making a "mmmmm" sound before you speak – does that raise or lower your status? The answer is that it depends on how you do it. If you do it meekly, it opens up space for others to speak (to interrupt your turn to speak) and lowers your status. If you do it very strongly and command the space with your "mmmmm" you are saying that you are very high status and even though you are not quite ready to speak, yet, you will still hold the floor and everyone else can wait until you are ready to share your words with them. We raise and lower our status in countless physical ways from how we stand, to how much space we take up (manspreading is a very status raising move), to how we hold our head. We do these small status moves with each other all the time, usually subconsciously.

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[47] This distinction between inside out for embodiment and outside in for physicality is something that Donna Ladkin and I first used in our edited volume on the physicality of leadership (Ladkin & Taylor, 2015).
[48] With my own students, in workshops in Denmark, Japan, and New Zealand to name a few.
[49] Status work is based in Keith Johnstone's classic on theatrical improvisation (Johnstone, 1979). I've described this work in more detail in several pieces (Taylor, 2013a, 2015a; Taylor & Taylor, 2017).

For me, one of the more interesting physical ways in which we connect and fail to connect is direct eye contact. Different cultures have different rules about what is appropriate and what is not for direct eye contact – a commoner does not make direct eye contact with the Queen. These rules tell us a lot about power hierarchies and also recognize the power of direct eye contact. I remember staring contests when I was young, they were battles for domination. Which is very different than the way lovers stare into each other's eyes – but both can be a very powerful form of direct physical connection.

Just as cultures have strong norms around direct eye contact, they also have norms around greeting rituals of connection. Some people hug, others kiss on the cheek three times, others shake hands. I was raised in a somewhat uptight, waspy culture in southern Ohio and I was taught from a young age to offer a firm handshake and make direct eye contact when meeting someone. That handshake and eye contact feel connecting to me. Or at least most of the time it does. The former American President Donald Trump became well known for shaking hands in a way that was a clear expression of dominance. Trump would grip the other person's hand painfully hard and pull them down and towards his body. When someone tries to crush my hand or offers a limp hand to shake, I feel disconnected. Something feels wrong and I have some sense that we will not be able to easily work together. The same is true for too much or the wrong kind of direct eye contact or someone who violates my personal space on a consistent basis. These are all physical indicators that they are playing by different cultural rules than I am – that we are not connected by a common experience.

The most profound physical greeting ritual I have encountered is the Maori hongi. You press your forehead and nose to the forehead and nose of the other person, hold it for a bit and then release. During the time you are nose to nose, you are breathing each other's air. It feels profound and in many ways very alien to me. I like it and I feel somewhat naked when I do it, especially with someone I don't know. It is undeniably physical and connecting. There are ways in which it is like a good hug, but also ways in which it feels very different. Here, my words fail me when I attempt to describe that difference. But what I can say is that the prevalence of physical connection rituals across cultures tells me that physical connection is important, not just in one culture or even in many cultures, but more fundamentally it is an important part of what it is to be human.

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020/2021 gave us all a chance to experience the difference between in-person physical interactions and online virtual interactions. Beyond the lack of direct physical contact – no hugs, no handshakes, no hongi – there were many other ways in which moving to primarily virtual interactions changed how we connected. The first thing I noticed was the lack of casual interactions when we moved to virtual meetings. There was no longer those few minutes before the start of the meeting or after the end of the meeting when I would have short interactions with people. Those interactions were mostly social, just checking in on how each other were doing and what was happening in each other's lives. But sometimes they were also work related, small questions that didn't really merit scheduling a meeting for, or weren't the sort of thing I wanted to ask someone over email. And I couldn't really have those conversations at the start of an online meeting because everyone in the meeting could hear the discussion as they came online and they were conversations that felt better with just two people talking quietly in the corner of the room. There were also no longer accidental interactions by the water cooler or coffee machine or just in the hallway. In short, the spaces around the edges of formal interaction, which were often very important for maintaining connection and taking care of small things all but disappeared.

The important thing for me is not that there were a lot of things that I accomplished in these informal encounters, which was true and certainly problematic in the move to all virtual meetings. The important thing was what these brief, physical encounters do for connection. I noticed how much I missed actually seeing people and encountering them physically. For me it wasn't so much the lack of physical contact, which I know was difficult for my more

physical (read huggy) friends and colleagues, it was just being physically present with others. I know this because seeing people in an online meeting just wasn't the same thing, I didn't feel the same sense of connection to them. There is something about physical proximity to others that is important. I think there is an argument to be made about our past as early humans and how we lived together in groups in villages and that our connection and sense of being in the same tribe is based in that constant physical proximity. Regardless of why, physical proximity matters and even when we aren't doing anything together, just being in the same room matters and connects us in some way. In a practical sense, it allows for serendipity in our interactions. When I am physically near them I can notice things, have casual conversations, and learn things that I didn't know would be useful later. But in a deeper sense, the simple experience of being together in the same physical space connects us as human beings, breathing the same air, experiencing the same world. In important ways that is not the case when we interact virtually. Online, I may see you (or at least your face), but we are very much experiencing two different worlds.

The dual benefits of physical proximity – the serendipitous interactions and the felt sense of connection – have an implication for leadership. Simply put, being there is important. Early in my time as Dean, I met with all of the faculty one on one. One of them, who had been a Dean himself at a different university in an earlier stage of his career told me that a large part of the job was just showing up. We were specifically talking about networking and establishing connection to the local business community and his advice was to show up to everything, every chamber of commerce meeting, every business roundtable event, every event where business leaders were likely to be. I'm an introvert and there are few things I dislike more than networking and attending meetings that I don't have to with people I don't know, so I didn't go to those meetings if I didn't have to. It's one of the ways in which I wasn't very good at being the Dean and I think it would be fair to say that I failed at establishing connections to the local business community. I might have if I had just shown up.

The second thing I noticed was the lack of sensory information in virtual interactions. At best case, we see a video image of a person's head and hear their voice. At worst case, the other's camera is turned off and their microphone is muted – we are getting no sensory information at all about them. The best case is very impoverished in information compared with in person interactions. In person, I see the whole person, what they are wearing, what they are doing with their hands and legs, how they are relating to the context, what else is happening in the background – in short, a world of sensory information that I am unconsciously processing and choosing what to pay attention to and what not to pay attention to. And even though we do tend to pay the most attention to other people's faces because they hold the most useful information for us, the rest is also important and not having it can make a significant difference in how we connect.

In America, we use the term "poker-face" to mean when it is difficult or impossible to read someone's emotions in their face. But as any poker fan knows, it is really a poker body, as players are as likely to give away what they are thinking and feeling with small gestures or specific nervous ticks (their tells). It's a movie cliché to say "they always take a big drink after their bet when they are bluffing – that's their tell." But there is truth in the way we can have insight into the other through their body language. Even though the original research that claimed 93% of all communication is nonverbal is problematic in many ways – not the least of which is it only claims to be about difficult, heavily emotional encounters – there is still an important truth in how much information we glean that is not just what people say or their facial expression. Not having this sensory information means that people in virtual interactions are more likely to make errors (of both commission and omission) in their understanding of each other. Those errors could lead us to feel more or less connected than is merited. The lack of sensory information also leads to less (or perhaps poorer is a better word) felt experience which in itself means less or poorer felt connection.

In these virtual meetings I am often reminded of a moment in graduate school. I was at auditions for one of my plays and the director commented about one of the actors. "He's very good from the neck up, but he is completely disconnected from what is going on in the rest of his body." My director was right. The emotional reality that that actor was presenting was completely different in his face and head than it was in his body. It was as if he had somehow learned to act in his head, but the process didn't extend into the rest of his body and his body was living out whatever was going on for him as a person rather than what was going on for the character he was enacting. In the audition, his head was the character who was strong and determined, while his body was nervous and seemed to be trying to run away and hide.

Actors are trained to act with their whole body, although as the previous example shows, not all of them are good at it. But most of us aren't trained actors and most of us are by and large unable to stop our body (often including our head and face) from giving away what is going on for us. Although we may not consciously be aware of it, we are also very good at reading what is going on for others based on what their body is doing. That is not to say we don't get it wrong, for most of us we probably get it wrong very often. But more importantly we get something, we get a felt sense of the emotional reality of others from being in physical proximity with them. This matters for connection for a couple of reasons.

The first is the way in which we (again often unconsciously) assess whether what the person is saying matches what their body is telling us. I am sure we have all had the experience of someone saying that they are not mad when their body, their behavior tells us the opposite is true. The person may honestly believe that they are not mad, so this is not a case of saying that people are lying when their words and body don't match. We might call this inauthenticity or perhaps behavioral hypocrisy and it is something we are all guilty of from time to time. But when the body and words don't match, we experience the other as hiding something or being inauthentic and it is much harder, if not impossible, to connect with them.

For leaders this relates directly to the performative nature of authenticity[50]. If leaders want people to connect with them (and my argument here is that this at the heart of the craft of leadership), then they need to be authentic or more precisely they need others to perceive them as being authentic. This is not as simple as just being yourself, which in my opinion is a very naïve understanding of authenticity and authentic leadership. Being perceived as being authentic means that your body matches your message and that both resonate with the audience. It happens naturally for most people in some situations. But leaders can't afford to have it happen in some situations and not in others because being perceived as inauthentic can destroy connection and like most aspects of relationships, a small amount of damage takes a great deal of time and effort to repair. It is all the more difficult for leaders who are balancing being open and transparent with holding the psychological container for the group. Leaders often have information they cannot share, information they have agreed with others to keep private until the time is right, and at the same time they need to communicate and share as part of their ongoing work of connecting with others in the organization. It is a fine line and one that can be very difficult to tread.

Leaders aren't the only ones who are constantly monitoring their own bodily performances of their inner state – we are all doing it almost all the time. We try and perform – with more or less skill at doing so – for the specific situation we find ourselves in. I would try and look like I was paying attention in meetings of the management council even when we were discussing something I didn't care about at all. I am perhaps more conscious than most people of this idea of the performativity of being in the audience because of my background in theater. That is, I feel an obligation "to give good audience" and I feel annoyed when

[50] Donna Ladkin and I used ideas from theater to explore authenticity in "Enacting the True Self" (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010).

others don't. For me, looking at your phone while we are in a meeting is the opposite of giving good audience and suggests that either you have no interest in being in the meeting (with me and whomever else is there) or if it is my meeting than I am doing such a poor job of leading it that I have lost the audience. I suppose this tendency could be understood as me being fake in order to please others, but I don't understand it that way. I think of it as a commitment to the physicality of connection. That is to say, when we are in the same room and trying to actively do something together, we need to also actively physically connect and that is a whole body activity that requires all of my efforts. I cannot multi-task and still have that physical, felt connection with others. Nor do I believe that others can.

I suspect that even when we are trying to be open and completely present with others we are still doing some monitoring, some degree of self-censoring that hides something of what is going on for us from others. I'm not talking about the sort of disagreement people may physically express in an interaction or even the disinterest they may show. In an aside, I collected pictures from my time as Dean that others took and showed me leading a meeting or speaking at an event and the other people in the picture look bored, disgusted, or angry while I was speaking. I collected these pictures not just because they helped keep me humble, but because even those reactions were reactions to the moment and were an honest physical engagement with what was going, with me. It wasn't the reaction I wanted from the audience, but it was better than no reaction at all, it was better than them being on their phones.

When I think about the overwhelming physical sense of connection I described at the start of the previous confession when I was holding hands with my dying faculty member, I believe she had no self-censoring going on at all and that was a large part of why the feeling of connection was so strong and overwhelming. Perhaps because she had come to terms with the knowledge that she was dying or perhaps because the disease had taken her ability to self-censor, she didn't self-censor – she simply was there, fully human, in a way that I have almost never experienced or heard others talk about.

If my intuition that we are almost always doing some degree of physical self-censoring when we interact with others is correct, and if my sense that that self-censoring can be detected by others and that it inhibits connection, then there is an interesting implication for virtual interactions. By being virtual, you don't have the same sense of the other person self-censoring or hiding something from you. All you have is the explicit message, especially when that interaction is text based, and you don't have the additional physical sense of the other. This potentially opens the door for a greater level of connection in virtual interactions than we might have with the same interaction were it not virtual. We have all heard stories of people having intense connections with people in completely virtual settings and I suspect that this dynamic may be part of why that happens.

Attraction

One of the tragic forms of intense virtual connection is catfishing, where someone creates a fake identity (often a different gender) and fosters a romantic relationship with someone who is unaware that they are falling in love with a fiction. It is harder to imagine this happening in non-virtual encounters because of all the sensory evidence that would betray the fake identity. For my purposes it also raises the topic of romantic attraction. Surely throughout human history romantic attraction has traditionally been one of the most important aspects of the physicality of connection. When we think about the craft of leadership and working connection it is also one of the most complex types of connection, full of instrumental and ethical landmines.

As a starting point, let me be clear about what I mean by physical attraction as a type of connection. I am talking about connection, so it is an immediate, felt, short-lived phenomena that occurs within the context of a relationship – that is to say, it may enhance or even create the relationship or diminish the relationship. It can also be asymmetric –

certainly we have all been attracted to someone who wasn't attracted to us and visa versa. I don't think we really understand the basis of physical attraction and we explain it to each other in various ways. It is pheromones, they made me laugh, her eyes, we have so much in common, those washboard abs, her energy, and so on. The science fiction television show "The One" is based in the premise that there is a DNA match that is the basis of the perfect romantic partner and lasting love relationship.

I distinguish between physical attraction and love. I think of love as a complex topic itself and something that is more a property of the relationship. And of course, there are different types of love. I love my students, but that doesn't mean I want to sleep with them. I love my family, but again that doesn't mean I want to sleep with them. Physical attraction and the physical actions it leads to, from holding hands to kissing, to full on sex, are a distinct type of connection that is a very powerful force in the world, independent of love. It is also a type of connection that can be deeply problematic for leaders and other organizational members.

Many organizations have rules about sexual relations between employees. In particular, most organizations recognize that power dynamics are problematic and often prohibit sexual relationships between people where there are formal power relationships – such as in a university between a faculty and a student. These prohibitions may not stop sexual interactions from happening, but they do highlight the complex nature of power and attraction. An old saying tells us that power is the ultimate aphrodisiac – and for some it probably is. Many years of bad behavior by men in power show us how power can be used to coerce others into sexual relations.

The former US President, Bill Clinton was impeached for lying about having sex with the White House intern, Monica Lewinsky. It was an ethical problem for Clinton because he was cheating on his wife and independently because there was a very large power dynamic with Lewinsky. It was also a political problem because it left him vulnerable to attacks from his political opponents. In this way, our culture treats the connection of physical attraction very differently than other types of connection. Having the hots for someone is just not the same as playing golf with them on weekends and having sex with someone is completely different than having dinner with them[51]. But of course, there is considerable difference between having the hots for someone (or them having the hots for you) and having sex with them.

Clinton famously had a sort of personal charisma that many people found sexually attractive. A friend of mine told me that she was at a campaign gathering for Clinton and even though there were hundreds of people in the room, she had the feeling that Clinton was connecting with her personally and she was the only person in the room for him. She told me she wanted to sleep with him, which was very out of character for her. The question this raises for me is whether it is ever ethical to use this sort of connection – even without having a sexual relationship – to move things forward in the organization? As a leader, is a connection that is rooted in physical attraction different from other types of connection? Is it in some way a fundamentally different thing to ask someone to work with you to accomplish something because you have played golf together for many years and are good friends than it is to ask someone to work with you because they are physically attracted to you or you to them? I think that it is a different thing. But it is also never as simple as the connection being based in just physical attraction and everyone being aware that that is what is going on. Human relations are almost always more complex and less clear than that.

There is something about physical attraction that that implies a lack of clarity. Within organizations, other types of connection and physical proximity can lead to physical attraction. If others are trying to connect with you around work issues, you may understand

[51] Groucho Marx famously said to a young woman on his show, "do you know the difference between sex and a Caesar Salad?" "No," she answered. "Would you like to come to my room for dinner tonight?" he quipped.

that as them being attracted to you when they aren't. I know multiple female colleagues who tell stories about being a woman in STEM and how many of their STEM close colleagues hit on them. The woman were all very much a minority in their lab and department. I suspect that the men felt connection to these women who spoke their language and understood what excited them. They did have a lot in common. I am sure these women were nice and engaged socially. Nonetheless, it became awkward and uncomfortable for all of the women when they received unwanted advances. My point here is that whenever physical attraction enters the mix, everything becomes complex, messy, and can lead to problems. It can also add energy to working together – I have one friend who tells me that all of her best work has been done with people she is physically attracted to, but as she says, "physical attraction is like lighter fluid – dangerous, but helpful".

The larger insight here is the way in which physical attraction highlights the performativity of the physicality of connection. This can be as simple as negotiating greeting rituals – something I often have difficulty with. I know that when I am in Japan, the greeting is a bow and that I am given a lot of slack in how appropriately I bow. But sometimes, my closer colleagues in Japan greet me with a handshake or even a hug because I am American. I am usually not sure what the proper greeting is, so I pay a lot of attention to the physical performance of the other person hoping to get some small clue about whether we are going to bow, shake hands, or hug. The same is true when I see people I know in the USA. With some friends I shake hands, with some we hug, and with some we kiss in some fashion. When I get it wrong, it is briefly awkward and I feel slightly disconnected. We may laugh about it, but it is a moment that lets me know we weren't on the same page.

Although most of us may not be paying much conscious attention to others' physical performance, we are unconsciously influenced by it. We are aware when something just feels a little hinky, or when we feel a particular closeness for no obvious reason that we are aware of – this is largely due to the way in which we have picked up the physical performance of the other. Here, I use the term performance rather than talking about body language or simply physicality in order to emphasize that it is something that we have some control over. It is performance in the way that an actor performs a role on the stage or in front of the camera. It is performance in the way that an athlete performs on the field or the court. And in the same way that actors and athletes consciously work on the smallest details of their physical performance, so to can a leader be aware of, work on, and get better at their own physical performance and how that enhances or diminished connection with others.

The analogy to acting opens up an intriguing aspect of working connection. Although I have largely been focused on connection between two people, connection in dyadic or small group interactions, acting is about connecting to a larger audience. The connection an actor is trying to create is to tens or hundreds or even thousands of people in a theater or perhaps millions in film or television. That connection is very asymmetric. Acting in front of a camera means there is no immediate connection with the audience, and even though acting on the stage involves some connection to the audience – actors hear laughter and can feel when an audience is restless – it is a very different thing than directly interacting with another person.

Leaders leading larger organizations often find themselves in a similar position to actors where they have little to no direct connection with those they are trying to connect with. There are many leaders throughout time who have been very good at doing this. But, I think it is in some ways a very different skill than connecting with individuals in one-on-one situations. And fundamentally it is a different type of connection that is created. How is it different? What do I mean by a type of connection? That is the topic of the next confession.

Confession 7. Different types of connection.

The beautiful game

It was a summer evening, sometime in the early 1990s and I was playing Ultimate in a local league. The team consisted largely of guys I had gone to college with and we had been playing Ultimate together for over a decade. I had the disc and saw David running diagonally towards the left back corner of the endzone. His defender was just behind him. I threw the disc to the right back corner of the endzone. After the disc left my hand, David cut back toward the right back corner and the disc met him there for a goal. It was beautiful.

In some fundamental way, Ultimate is a game of connection as you can only advance the disc by passing it to your teammate. With David that connection felt beautiful to me because it was based in us seeing the field the same way. I threw it before he made the cut and he cut without seeing me throw it. We saw the same thing, the same place for him to be and me to throw to without having any sort of play or plan about what to do in that sort of situation. What we did have was years of playing together. It didn't always work out that way, sometimes I threw to a place and my teammate didn't cut there. But when it did happen, it was a beautiful moment, a beautiful connection.

Beautiful connection

Beautiful is the adjective that comes to mind when I try to describe most of the positive examples of connection I have used so far. Beauty is an aesthetic category, by which I mean it is the way in which we name a particular type of aesthetic experience. Although beauty is the aesthetic category most people think of when they think of aesthetics, it is not the only one. There are many different types of felt experience that we name in different ways such as the ugly, the sublime, the grotesque, and the comic. Many of these have been extensively theorized by philosophers over the years, which provides us a way of gaining analytic insight into these different felt experiences. In this confession, I will explore three different aesthetic categories of connection, the beautiful, the sublime, and the grotesque.

Since the ancient Greeks, philosophers have theorized what beauty is. There is little reason to think that any definitive answer will ever be reached. How we think about beauty varies not only over time, but from culture to culture[52]. The Japanese phrase wabi-sabi is often translated as beauty, which in one sense is reasonable. Yet, at another level the importance of imperfection and transience that are central to wabi-sabi are far from central to my American cultural sense of beauty. All of which is to say that I am not going to spend much effort on looking for the best theorization of beauty, but rather instead go with one that seems to work and offers an analytic perspective that provides us with useful insight.

My friend and colleague, Donna Ladkin[53] has used the conceptions of the ancient Greek philosophers, Plato and Plotinus to theorize beautiful leadership. Since I am particularly interested in connection as it relates to leadership, this seems like a good starting point for thinking about beautiful connection. She identifies three important aspects of beautiful leadership: mastery, congruence, and purpose.

As a quick test, let's look at what these three aspects tell us about my Ultimate connection throwing the disc to David. I would argue that it was based in mastery. It required a mastery of seeing the field and what the field would look like – much like basketball great Larry Bird famously being able to know where the ball was *going* to be – on the part of both David and me. One aspect of why it felt beautiful to me was the mutual mastery. In many fields it

[52] "Six Names of Beauty" (Sartwell, 2006) is an excellent exploration of how beauty differs across cultures.
[53] In a wonderful article (Ladkin, 2008) that draws upon a performance by Bobby McFerrin.

takes a level of expertise to recognize mastery in others[54] and that recognition of David's mastery in knowing where to cut to was a big part of the experience of beauty for me.

The second aspect, congruence is about alignment between what you are doing and how you are doing it. Most of what we were trying to do as a team was unspoken, but I would summarize it as having a very egalitarian and improvisational Ultimate team that had a lot of fun. Unlike most teams of that time, we didn't have positions or set plays after stoppages. Our approach was to simply flow, to count on everyone to do what should be done based on what they saw happening on the field. Given that as our purpose, the pass to David was very congruent with what we were trying to do and this is also part of why it felt beautiful to me.

The third aspect purpose is about the goals of what you are trying to accomplish. Our goals were simple, we wanted to play some Ultimate, have fun, get some exercise, and try to win. Winning wasn't enormously important to us, but winning was always more fun than losing. Was our purpose beautiful? It wasn't for the greater good of humanity or anything like that, but it wasn't ugly. To the degree that it was sport for the sake of sport, it may even have been a little noble. I think that of the three aspects, purpose had the least to do with why I experienced it as beautiful. I take from this the insight that the three aspects might not all provide the same level of insight and that Ladkin's conception of beautiful leadership provides a useful way to analyze beautiful connection.

As an example, let me look at one of my favorite moments of connection when I was Dean. The Dean of Engineering, the Dean of Arts and Sciences, and I would meet about once a month. Before Covid, these meetings took place in one of our offices or at a local restaurant. I enjoyed those meetings and the connection I had with the other Deans. Leadership can be lonely and the other Deans were peers who had similar issues and problems to deal with. We gave each other advice on how to deal with problems, we helped each other understand various situations such as what the President or Provost was asking for from us. And, especially when we met off-site and enjoyed a glass of wine while we spoke, we listened to each other complain about the trials and tribulations of being a middle manager, of being a Dean. Helping each other reach a common understanding of what was happening in our worlds created a strong connection for me. And so did bitching about whatever each of us had to bitch about – something I imagine that most of us can relate to.

The first aspect of beautiful connection is mastery. When we were helping each other solve problems, I don't know that we were masters – none of us had a lot of experience of being a Dean – but we had a pretty good process. By a pretty good process, I mean that we worked together well, really listened to each other, brought different perspectives to the discussion, and each of us were open to be influenced in our thinking by the others. So, although I wouldn't claim mastery of the content of what we talked about, I would say that we showed considerable skill in how we talked about things and I think that is a big part of why my sense of that connection was that it often felt beautiful. The second aspect is congruence and I think the way we worked together was very congruent with our purpose of being better at deaning and to the degree possible making the university work better for everyone.

The third aspect is about goals and this is where the analysis gets uncomfortable for me. When we were solving problems together, I think we were working towards a very ethical and beautiful goal of making things better for everyone. However, when we were just bitching about our problems, I don't think I can claim that was working towards that goal. We were venting, which I think has the goal of letting off some steam or perhaps getting others to feel sorry for you or perhaps having others validate how unfair and unreasonable things are in your life. None of those goals sound very beautiful. And although I don't see

[54] I refer to this as being an aficionado in my own academic work on beauty (Taylor, 2013b).

venting as being fundamentally unethical, there is a way in which it feels less than kind at best and mean at worst. There is also a way in which bitch sessions can leave me with a sour taste in my mouth – sort of an emotional indigestion where afterwards I don't feel good about having participated in it, particularly when I have said something cutting about someone who wasn't there (even if at the time it was extremely funny). All of which leads me to question the connection I felt in those bitch sessions. It was very strong, but I don't think it was beautiful. But, if it wasn't beautiful, what was it?

Let's leave that hanging for a bit and explore the first insight from that analysis – that mastery of the process of working together to solve problems feels like something that can lead to beautiful connection. Above I said we really listened to each other, brought different perspectives to the discussion, and each of us were open to be influenced in our thinking by the others. All of these are characteristics of approaches to communication that are marketed to modern business organizations, from talking circle dialogue to integrative negotiation approaches to theatrical improvisation. The commonality is not surprising and also makes a point about craft, namely that the same set of skills are often packaged and promoted in different ways even though they are fundamentally the same. In theatrical improvisation, the term of art is "yes and"[55] which means listening to the offer that the other person makes, accepting that offer (saying *yes* to it) *and* building on it. For an improv scene, one actor makes a statement that implies something about the situation and the other person and the other actors accept those implied things as being true and then imply additional details in their response. Of course, in a theatrical improv anything can be true and we tend to think that there are facts on the ground in our organizational lives that we cannot ignore. And yes there are facts on the ground, but there are far fewer facts than we would like and most of what matters is around meaning, intent, and future consequences which are always not completely knowable. In this way, when I talk about really listening to each other and being open to influence from each other it is a very similar skill to theatrical improvisation. In theatrical improv it requires having a "yes and" mindset, in meetings with others in my organization it requires believing that the other person is intelligent, has access to information that I don't have, and has my interests at heart (they aren't intentionally trying to hurt me). Whether I think of this as an improv mindset, or an inquiry-based mindset, or even a craft mindset doesn't really matter. It is a critical aspect to how a leader works connection.

A second critical factor that comes out of those discussions is the role of our old friend power. In the closed confines of our office or at the restaurant, there were no appreciable power dynamics. There was no audience other than ourselves to play to or be concerned about. There was no ego or other sense of competition. We all knew that there was a power hierarchy for the three schools and where we stood in that, but it didn't come into play when we were talking amongst ourselves as equals. This openness and lack of power dynamics is at the core of what it means to enact being equals. It suggests to me that symmetry in the relationship is helpful in creating beautiful connection and that beautiful connection tends towards symmetry. I might guess that a connection that feels beautiful to me probably also feels beautiful to the other person.

Sublime connection

In aesthetic philosophy the beautiful is often compared to and contrasted with the sublime. This distinction is generally something that most people would have a difficult time articulating, but since I think it is a useful distinction for analyzing connection, I will take it up next.

[55] Which comes from the foundational work of Keith Johnstone (Johnstone, 1979).

Here, I will again draw on the work of Donna Ladkin, who has used Kant's conceptualization of the sublime to explore charismatic leadership[56]. She tells us that the sublime is distinguished from the beautiful in three key ways. First, the sublime is the felt experience of the perceiver rather than being a characteristic of the object. That is to say, the experience is about one side of the connection rather than about the connection itself and what is a sublime connection for one person is probably not sublime for the other side of the connection. In this way, a sublime connection is fundamentally asymmetric in how it is experienced. The second way it is distinguished is that the experience cannot be adequately held in the imagination of the person, it is other-worldly or magical or in some way it exceeds our ability to fully grasp it. In this way a sublime connection is felt, but cannot be fully articulated by the one feeling it, which makes it very powerful and also resistant to rational analysis. Because we cannot fully grasp it, we fall short when we try to describe it to others and it feels like we are doing the experience an injustice when we try to describe it – it's that "you had to be there" experience of connection. The third way it is different than the beautiful is that it evokes what Kant calls "negative pleasure", which did not mean pain, but rather a complex feeling that includes pleasure as well as unease, fear, or even repulsion. So, a sublime connection is an intense, complex experience that is both pleasurable and not pleasurable in some ways.

When I think about my own experience of a sublime connection, one moment immediately comes to mind. It was early in November of 2016, the day before the presidential election. I was at the University of New Hampshire hockey arena, along with thousands of other people for a final rally for Hilary Clinton, the democratic candidate. What I, and I am guessing most of the other people there, were really there for was to hear President Barack Obama speak. We waited in line for hours, went through security and waited some more. We heard various democratic candidates speak. And the finally, Obama took the stage. He is a great speaker and he did not disappoint. Near the end of his speech, he launched into his "fired up, ready to go" story[57]. I believe it is a story that he has told many times over the years, but I had never heard it. At the end of the story, we are all – every one of the thousands of people in that arena – shouting, "Fired up! Ready to go!" and it was an overwhelming experience. It was sublime.

I felt strongly connected to President Obama. But, I am sure that he didn't feel any particular connection to me. He may love all of his supporters, but he certainly didn't know I was there or even who I was. The connection I felt was as one-way, as asymmetric as it could be. Even though, I am a leadership scholar and I have a masters in performing arts, there is some fundamental thing that I don't understand that was going on in that moment. I am happy to say that it was magic. I cannot adequately explain it, I can't do it myself, and I certainly can't teach it. We can call it charisma, but that just feels like another word for magic to me. And perhaps most interestingly to me was the "negative pleasure" feeling in it. I loved it, it was pleasurable. It was also very uncomfortable. I generally don't enjoy crowds and chanting in unison with thousands of other people makes uncomfortable. I get a sense of losing myself and feeling like I am no longer me. I find myself thinking, if he asks us to go do something horrific, I bet we would go do it. In that moment we are his to do with as he pleases. That is probably overstatement, but it is the best I can do to describe the unpleasant edge that experience has for me. And of course, given the opportunity I would happily go do it again because the discomfort is far outweighed by the rest of the experience.

I don't have any evidence that I have been on the other side of a sublime connection, nor would I given that the sublime is based in the experience of the perceiver. However, I do have some sense of asymmetric connection from my time as Dean. As Dean, I addressed the faculty and staff at our monthly meetings. In many ways it was a familiar experience

[56] In a wonderful piece called "The enchantment of the charismatic leader" (Ladkin, 2006).
[57] There is video of him telling the story at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5AhRqq0ADbk.

having spent many years teaching classes and running workshops. It was a group meeting and I was leading all or part of it. I felt responsible for holding the container and facilitating the flow of events, balancing the useful digressions with keeping us on task – all fairly normal stuff for any teacher or facilitator. And yet in other ways it was a very unfamiliar experience.

I spent most of the time I had with the faculty sharing data about our own enrollments over time and the market for graduate education and what I thought that meant for us as a school. I would share my thoughts on how I was articulating our identity and what I thought our strategy going forward should be. I felt like my central task was to create some consensus around these core issues of identity and strategy in a way that we could articulate to people outside the school and enact to increase our enrollment numbers. It was hard to tell whether it was working or not. Sometimes it was clear that something I said didn't work at all and sometimes I got feedback that something had worked well. I can clearly recall one of my faculty telling me that the chart I had presented to summarize what our strategy had been for the last three years and what it should be going forward was the best slide he had ever seen. That made me happy and I feel like he had really connected to that content and in that moment to me. But it also created a strange feeling in me. I found myself thinking, "oh crap, I've raised the bar and now they will expect that level of clarity and insight from me going forward." I don't have any reason to believe that was true, but it's what I felt in that moment. I can't help but wonder if President Obama felt the crowd chanting and cheering wildly as expectations that he had to carry. Again, I don't know what charismatic leaders feel in that moment, but I know that when I have come at all close to that, it has a heaviness that I do not like the feel of. I do not feel that weight when I am teaching. I do not have that same sense that I will let the students down even though I know from experience that there will probably be some of them who will not succeed in my class.

Popular culture and much of academic leadership has focused on leaders who are charismatic and known for creating what I imagine are sublime connections with their followers. There are of course, exceptions and I am conscious that some 2,500 years ago, the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu[58] said:

> To lead people, walk beside them ... As for the best leaders, the people do not notice their existence. The next best, the people honor and praise. The next, the people fear; and the next, the people hate ... When the best leader's work is done the people say, "We did it ourselves!"

This suggests to me that sublime connections are what followers might feel for "the next best" leaders, Lao Tzu's second tier of leadership. Nonetheless, "next best" is above average in my experience and far too often we encounter leaders that the people fear or hate. As I went on in length about it in confession 4, fear is a powerful force in our lives. I largely spoke about getting past fear, but it can also be used as tool for leadership and a tool for creating connection.

Grotesque connection

To explore how fear can be used, I turn to the aesthetic category of the grotesque[59]. For many of us the term grotesque will immediately evoke the word, gross. Although gross does not come from grotesque, the underlying sense of gross that means something that is disgusting or repulsive does have a family resemblance to the classic conceptions of the aesthetic category, the grotesque. For me, the word grotesque evokes images of

[58] Lao Tzu wrote the *Tao TeChing.* This idea gets echoed in the modern idea of Level 5 Leadership (Collins, 2001).
[59] Much of this discussion is based in an editorial I wrote about grotesque leadership (Taylor, 2018).

architectural adornments often also called gargoyles. The old gymnasium at my university had a wonderful set of grotesques that depicted various sports and activities that students might have engaged in in the first part of the twentieth century. The grotesques were much loved and when the building was torn down, a great deal of effort was put into saving them and integrating them into the new building that was built in its place. The grotesques are caricatures, that is they have exaggerated features that emphasize a stereotypical aspect of someone who might be doing that activity. This exaggeration and distortion is my starting point for the grotesque as an aesthetic category.

It's not just any sort of distortion that leads to the grotesque. Although, the grotesque is always contextual and what is grotesque for one generation is not grotesque for another, there are some common characteristics to the grotesque[60]. The first is that it is connected to fear and anxiety. This means that the connection is based in some sort of shared fear or anxiety, which implies that there is something or someone that is the object of that fear or anxiety. This object of fear or anxiety is distorted in a way that makes it scarier, more different, and less like us. The second characteristic is that the grotesque is about alienation and estrangement. For connection this means that the object of the fear and anxiety is causing us to feel alienated or estranged from what should be, from what we feel is the place and way we should be in the world. The third characteristic is that the grotesque is fundamentally subversive. This means it challenges the existing order of things, but in an indirect way. When we put these characteristics together we get a connection that is based in a fear of a distorted image of the other based in the belief that the other threatens our rightful place in the world and with the intent of challenging that other in order to restore or maintain the rightful order of things. It is a connection that is about us versus them, it is what I call, the connection of disconnection.

This is the connection of the bitch session. It serves to both ease fear and anxiety as you support each other and you learn that you aren't alone in your grievances. At the same time it increases your fear and anxiety as you come to realize that your fears are shared by others and thus are probably reasonable and appropriate. Your fellow bitch session folks may well one up you and show you how it is even worse than you realized – a typical dynamic in bitch sessions[61]. It is the paradox of the grotesque that it makes it both better and worse at the same time. The dynamic is us versus them and the them is objectified and distorted and the source of all our problems. Does this sound familiar? I am never proud of falling into this dynamic, but it has happened more times than I can count in my life.

The grotesque connection of disconnection happens often because it is easy. When I was collecting data for my doctoral dissertation, I interviewed the vice president of human resources at a tech company. We spoke about a meeting she had had with her staff. In that meeting they had talked about buying the space on a billboard that was directly across from their main competitor's office to advertise that they were looking for talent. The team had a great time talking about this. They were excited about poaching people from their competition. The VP spoke about the discussion with some regret. She said that creating an us versus them dynamic was the easiest way to create connection within the team, but she thought it was problematic and she thought there were better ways to create connection within the team. That conversation was over twenty years ago, but it has stuck with me and continues to resonate with me.

The us versus them connection may be unavoidable and even useful in some cases. For soldiers in battle, it may even feel noble. For sports teams it can be a vital part of a championship season. I learned growing up to be a competitor who wanted nothing more than to beat your opponent and at the same time to respect that opponent and treat them

[60] This is based on my reading of the literature on the grotesque (e.g. Fingesten, 1984; Harpham, 1976; Kayser & Weisstein, 1981; Rhodes & Pullen, 2007; Steig, 1970)
[61] I have called this "crying in your beer" reflection in the past (Taylor, 2014b).

with honor and dignity. That was sportsmanship. I learned in the military to both be focused on killing the enemy[62] and treating them with the rights due them as an enemy combatant. It is possible to have a strong "us" connection and not have that based in a distorted, grotesque view of the other.

But all too often in our world, the us versus them connection is grotesque and it is problematic. I think the us versus them connection is what drives "the blue wall of silence" that exists in so many of the police forces in the USA. The connection with their fellow police leads police to lie, to remain silent, and to cover up illegal and problematic behavior within their ranks. Grotesque connection is the glue that binds together white supremacist organizations. The US President Donald Trump showed the world just how strong a force in the world grotesque connection can be.

The difference between the grotesque connection and a more positive "us" connection is in how the other is seen. In the grotesque connection, the other is objectified and distorted – they become less than fully human. The other is also the source of the problems, "we" are somehow victims of the terrible and disgusting other. So, the grotesque connection is based in a group identity that is defined by the grievances against the other. In contrast, a more positive form of leadership works on creating connection based in a sense of who the group is[63] in a way that is defined by the attributes of the group itself. While the grotesque identity connection must have an other to blame and a mainstream to subvert and be alienated from, a more positive formation of identity needs neither.

Ideal types

It is perhaps most useful to think of these three types of connection as ideal types. That is to say, any connection we feel may be somewhat beautiful, but will also have ways in which it is not beautiful. A connection may be a mix of beautiful and sublime and even have a little bit of the grotesque to it. When I think of these three ideal types I have an image for each of them.

Beautiful connection is like the connection you have with your ideal romantic partner. It is symmetric, they love me just as much and in the same way that I love them. There is plenty of mastery in that we are both very good at loving the other, at expressing and enacting our love for the other in ways that work for us and for them. There is congruence in that we express and enact our love in ways that show the essence of the love – we are both generous to each other because we want to create a generous, loving relationship. And our purpose, to have a generous, loving relationship is certainly ethical and beautiful. Of course, few relationships live up to this ideal all the time, but it offers an idea of what I am trying to create when I work towards more beautiful connections.

A sublime connection is like the connection of a superfan to their object of fandom. It is felt intensely by the superfan while the person they are a fan of may be aware that they exist, but doesn't feel the same sort of connection at all. The connection is beyond the fan's ability to fully understand, there is something magical or other worldly about the person or team they are a fan of. And being a fan is an intense pleasure, but it is a complex pleasure that is not completely comfortable. I don't tend very strongly to fandom so I don't get this connection very well. I have some limited experience of having fans – mostly Scandinavian PhD students who have read all of my academic work and make a point of finding me to say hello at the coffee break of an academic conference. We have a nice chat and I try to turn it into a more symmetric (hopefully even a little beautiful) connection. I realize this is orders

[62] It was drilled into me, "your job Is not to die for your country, it is to make the other son-of-a-bitch die for their country."
[63] This what Grint (2001) calls the philosophic art of identity. Gardner (1995) tells us that leaders espouse and enact the identity of the group.

of magnitude less intense than real superfans. So, again, I don't understand this sort of connection very well from that side either. But I do recognize it as a critical type of connection for the leader who wants to lead larger organizations or groups.

A grotesque connection is the connection of a cult. It is based in a sense of us versus an objectified and distorted view of the other. The cult members are victims and feel alienated from the mainstream that they are working to subvert in some way. This sort of connection is easy to create, as it is always easier to see the other in terms of a stereotype rather than as fully human individuals. It is always easier to blame others for your problems than to look at your own culpability. This is not to say that others don't also have culpability, but with grotesque connection you ignore your own contribution. It is powerful and we see it a lot in our world. It is also always problematic and never ends well (if not for the cult members than for the others).

Although I have focused on the beautiful, the sublime, and the grotesque, there are many other aesthetic categories, such as the disgusting, the ugly, and the comic. There is no agreement on how many aesthetic categories there are and new aesthetic categories continually arise that capture the zeitgeist of a time. In recent years there has been academic work that describes the aesthetic categories of the cool and the cute[64]. I have to wonder what it would mean for a connection to be cool or cute? Intuitively I feel that both exist in my own life. But I will leave it to others to explore what that really means for connection and leadership.

Thinking about connection in terms of aesthetic categories is a way to be able to differentiate one felt connection from another felt connection. It is the start of a way to add depth and nuance to the discussion of connection that we have with ourselves and with others. In short, it is the start of a descriptive theory of connection. Providing a descriptive language that is useful for working with a phenomenon is one way the theory is useful to the crafts person. But a craft master also needs to be aware of potential landmines and ways in which things can go wrong. So, in the next confession I turn to difficulties with connection and ways in which connection can be problematic.

[64] See for example the work of Botz-Bornstein (2012) and Ngai (2012).

Confession 8. Difficulties with connection

Not being included

In the spring of 2019, the Provost decided to hold a research symposium that would cover the new research agenda for the university that he had been shepherding throughout the academic year. It was ambitious and interdisciplinary and covered several days. The concluding session was on the future of work. And much to my surprise, no one from the Business School was included in the session on the future of work. We were the place that studied organizations and work. Instead of scholars from the Business School, engineers were presenting their speculations about the future of work. It was disconnecting for me and for everyone in the Business School. It spoke volumes about our place in the university confirming every thought we had about how the university valued us. By the time I became aware of the agenda, it was too late to include us. I am sure that the Provost did not intentionally try to slight the Business School and I am sure he had good reasons for including the people he did, perhaps even because of connections he saw and was actively working. Nonetheless, it was damaging.

I felt some real empathy with the Provost because the fall before I had a similar experience. I had created a pamphlet to illustrate a possible future state for the Business School. It was a flyer for the Business School five years into the future and it included programs that didn't exist and spoke about some exciting and impactful research that some of the faculty were doing. That research was based in research that was currently underway. My intent was to get people thinking about where we might go and what our future might be. And I think it might have worked for some of the faculty and staff. But for at least one faculty member it was disconnecting and made them angry because I had not included their discipline in the examples of research in the school. It wasn't my intent to send the message that their discipline wasn't valued, but it was the message I had sent. It was damaging.

Cognitive differences in connection

Throughout this editorial I have offered examples of disconnection at least as often as I have given examples of connection. I have mostly talked about my own experience and more importantly my own understanding of connection. But just as I talked about how different connections can feel different, there is also an issue that the same connection – by which I mean a connection that is symmetric and seems to be very similar to both people – can be understood differently by different people. To explore these differences, I turn to adult development theory[65].

Most of us are at least somewhat familiar with ideas about childhood development, the ways in which we expect children to grow in their ability to do different things, from learning to look at their parents and smile to showing fear with strangers to showing defiant behavior to being able tell the difference between real and make-believe. Adult development suggests that we can continue to grow and develop as adults and that we do it in a largely predictable way much as children develop in a largely predictable way.

In the leadership development world, adult development is often referred to as vertical development. This is because adult development is about increasing mental complexity, which means that as a leader develops, they are gaining in their ability to understand and work with complex situations rather than learning new skills (which would be horizontal development). This vertical development happens in identifiable stages[66]. Kegan describes

[65] This idea of using developmental theory to explore differences in how people approach different concepts is inspired by Aftab Erfan's work on diversity issues (Erfan, 2021).

[66] There are many scholars working in the field, the two that have had the most influence on my thinking have been Bob Kegan (Kegan, 1982, 1994) and Bill Torbert (e.g. Torbert, 1991; Torbert & Associates, 2004; Torbert & Taylor, 2008).

these stages in terms of what defines someone's identity, the things that they are, or are *subject* to versus the things that someone has, the things that are not part of their self, things that are *objects* for them. We are able to have a perspective on things that are object to us, but we do not have a perspective on things we are subject to – those things simply *are*, they exist as *a priori* facts for us. In each successive stage of development the things that were subject in the previous stage become object in the next stage. So, for example, in the second stage, a person has feelings, impulses, and perception where in the stage before that they were subject to their feelings, impulses, and perception. This transition happens for most people by the time they reach adolescence.

In the second stage which Kegan calls "The Imperial Mind", the person is subject to their own needs, interests, and desires. The implication for connection is that someone at this stage will connect with others who meet their needs or fulfill their desires. The sort of connection with the faculty and Provost I described in confession 3 that came from making together is unlikely to be experienced by someone at this stage, or more to the point, it would be based in the fulfillment of their own needs rather than in making together. It may not be possible to tell that difference from the outside, but I think it would matter, especially to a leader who was working on their own craft of working connection. They might notice that when the other person's needs were met or when the making moved away from being about their own needs, the connection waned. Luckily, most adults have developed past this stage.

The majority of adults are in stage three which Kegan calls "The Socialized Mind", where they now have needs, interests, and desires, and are subject to interpersonal relationships. In one sense, connection becomes incredibly important as what others think of us defines who we are. But this also means that connection to self is difficult because we tend to not have a very well developed sense of self that is independent of what others think of us. This implies that the existential fears I talked about in confession four are likely to be inaccessible and thus real impediments to connection that may be impossible to overcome. Following this line of thinking suggests that while relationships are everything, deep connection (in some of the ways I have been thinking about it) is difficult if not impossible. Although, it is important to recognize that because relationships define who they are, connections may feel extremely deep and overwhelmingly important. For a leader or follower in stage three the path they have for working connection is to change their behavior so that they see things the same way as everyone else does, even though everyone else does not see things the same way. This puts them into horrible dilemmas and may drive a leader into being intolerant of different views – perhaps even to the extreme of "cancelling" those who don't see things the same way they do or behave in the ways that their view of the world demands.

Roughly a third of adults are in stage four which Kegan calls "The Self-Authoring Mind", where they have relationships and are subject to self-authorship, identity, and ideology. Connection with your self is possible, even foundational to who you are. And one could argue, that since this is the point in development where we *have* relationships and they are separate from who we are, it is also the point where we could actually *work* connection in the way a craft master works their medium. So, from a developmental theory perspective, the core idea I have been exploring here is only accessible to a third of adults. That is something of a wet blanket and calls into question the whole conception of the craft of leadership as working connection. It argues that leadership craft mastery requires adult development and a level of mental complexity that nearly two thirds of the population doesn't have.

Stage five of development which Kegan calls "The Self-Transforming Mind" means having self-authorship, identity, and ideology as something that you can choose and work with. This means being able to have multiple senses of identity and choose between them, which strikes me as a powerful tool in the toolbox of the leadership craft master. However, only about one percent of adults have developed to this level of mental complexity, so that feels

like too much to ask. This is only a very cursory dip into developmental theory and I have probably gotten something important wrong. In reality, there are many recognizable transition stages between these five stages and at any given time many of us are in some sort of transition. Our mental complexity is also influenced by our environment and we may behave with stage three mental complexity in one context and with stage four mental complexity at another.

The way in which our understanding of connection can change as we grow in mental complexity implies that working connection may be difficult – as an idea and even more so in practice – for most of the population. It also suggests that the path to mastery for the leader who thinks of the medium of their craft as connection must include the development of their own mental complexity. Of course, in any craft, true masters are few and far between.

Gender differences

If there are differences in how we understand connection at different stages of adult development, then surely there are probably other ways in which our experience and conception of connection may differ. A close friend read an early draft of this editorial and said that it all felt very male and in that way was disconnecting for her. And of course, it is written by me, a male, who was largely trying to connect with other males such as the Provost, in what I have to describe as a very male culture. My university was founded in the middle of the 19th century to educate engineers during the first industrial revolution. The culture comes from that very male-dominated world of engineering and even though the university and the culture have grown and changed, there is still a strong ghost of the founding ethos.

It is a culture that puts a lot of emphasis on solving real-world, practical problems. It puts less emphasis on being nurturing. I am reminded of another friend who often draws on the caricatures of men as hunters and women as nurturers to talk about gender issues. He says, "I was being all hunt, hunt, hunt, kill" (to indicate he was focused on trying to solve the problem) "and she [his wife] didn't need the problem to be solved, she just wanted some nurturing." And what he means is that sometimes the most important people in our lives, those we most want to connect with, don't want to talk about their problems because they want you to help solve those problems, they just want to be listened to and be heard. The hunt, hunt, hunt, kill versus nurture, nurture, nurture conflict doesn't always play out along gender lines, but it often does and it points us towards what my friend may mean by saying that my understanding of connection is very male.

Looking back on the connection I have described in this editorial, I see a very external, problem-solving sort of connection with the Provosts. The small moment of connecting with the first Provost about wearing Vivo Barefoot shoes because they made our backs feel better was the connection of two old guys who had found the same solution to the same problem. The moments of connecting with the second Provost around the strategy for Business School were also based in solving external problems. In a very real sense, my focus on connection from making together is the connection of the hunt, hunt, hunt, kill, problem-solving mindset. In contrast the connection I felt with the President when she said I was also one of the good guys was very different. It was a connection about how she and I felt, an internally based connection, that was about being seen and being heard, and it felt fundamentally nurturing.

I also have a theory of the differences between the problem-solving, external sort of connection I had with the Provosts and the more nurturing connection I had with the President that is not based in the gender differences. The connection with the Provosts that I describe is about me trying to create/enhance a connection up the power hierarchy. The brief moment of connection with the President was a connection that happened to me down the hierarchy. The President didn't recall the moment and wasn't intentionally trying to work

her connection with me. But perhaps, the real difference here is the difference in how connection is created and worked up the power hierarchy versus down the hierarchy. From an early age we want and need our parents, our first leaders, to nurture us. We want them to see us and hear us and I think I felt connection to them when that happened. And as I grew older I also felt connected with my parents when I did things with them like helping my father finish the basement or doing art projects with my mother. But even as I say that, I feel the gendered difference of the way the things with my father were much more about problem-solving about doing external things and the things with my mother were more about how I felt and her support of what I was doing.

Throughout this editorial I have paid much more attention to creating and working connections up the power hierarchy than down it. I think there are several reasons for that. The first being that most of what seemed to me be the difficult problems required working up the power hierarchy. I didn't have a lot of problems within the Business School, because as I said earlier, I had great staff and faculty and I had known all of them for years. I think they all were happy that I had agreed to be the Dean and they did whatever work was needed to connect with me – which may not have been easy, I don't know. I think this may be typical of connections across the power hierarchy. Much like power itself, we tend to be concerned with the connections up the power hierarchy and take the connections down the power hierarchy for granted. And if that is the case, then really this editorial has been about connection as the medium of the craft of followership and the subtitle really should be, confessions of failed (or the alliterative adjective of your choice) follower.

Leadership as craft

Another difficulty with the idea that the craft of leadership is based in working the medium of connection, is the premise that leadership is a craft and can usefully be thought of as a craft. I say this because in speaking with many artists and in my own practice as an artist, it always seems to come back to the craft, to the techniques, and ideas of art are left for "gallery-speak" and grant applications. I don't hear leaders talk about their own craft this way. I don't see leadership written about in the popular or academic press this way. I don't see leadership taught this way. When I raise the idea of leadership as craft with my students, the typical response is, "huh, I never thought of leadership that way."

At the heart of any craft is the medium of the art form. Crafts people have a special relationship with their medium. They think about it, they talk with each other about it, they work it, they come to know it in a deep and profound way, and they have a great deal of respect for it. Leaders are hamstrung because they don't have a common understanding of what their medium is. Leaders are left to follow their own idiosyncratic conceptions of the craft of leadership, that is if they have a conception of it at all.

I believe that having leaders approaching their own leadership as a craft is the best way to address the problems the world faces today (and probably tomorrow and yesterday as well). Approaching your work as a craft moves you from caring about what you accomplish to being deeply concerned with how you accomplish it. That's not to say that the outcome is unimportant (more on that later), but it means that you are never really satisfied with how you're doing. I don't mean that in a negative, self-doubt way, but rather in a positive, continuous improvement way. There is a story that the legendary cellist Pablo Casales, who was in his nineties at the time, was asked why he practiced so much and so intently. "I think I'm making progress," answered Casales. It doesn't really matter if the story is true or not, it captures the essence of what a commitment to craft looks like. Greatness comes from continued deliberate practice[67]. Natural talent helps, but continued deliberate practice is essential. If we want our leaders to be great, they will need to work on their craft.

[67] I'm take the term "deliberate practice" from Ericsson's work on expertise (Ericsson & Pool, 2016; Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993).

For most of the things in our lives, we probably don't need great leadership. By analogy, we don't need beautiful Danish mid-century modern chairs that are also works of art in our homes. Ordinary chairs from the local furniture store will serve the purpose of giving us some place to sit. But if I want a great sitting experience, something that is comfortable and beautiful and makes the chair fetishist in me happy, then I do need a great chair. My suggestion is that we need more than just any old chair. The problems humanity faces in the 21rst century are based in an interconnected and complex world. The problems themselves are interconnected and complex with no easy and obvious path forward. In order to solve these problems, we need truly great leadership. Not just one or even a few great leaders, but lots of great leadership at every level and in every aspect of global society.

We need great leaders so obsessed with their own craft of leadership that instead of producing ordinary chairs, they produce chairs that are timeless works of art. Of course, here the chairs are actions that address our problems. Actions that address climate change, pollution, wealth disparity, species extinction, social justice, and so on in ways that will create a better, more just future for humans and everything else on planet earth. Those actions can't be simple, functional acts – chairs that aren't beautiful or even very comfortable, but do give us a place to sit. Those actions need to be so much more. They need to transcend the complexity, to transcend disciplinary and conceptual silos, to transcend existing entrenched social structures of privilege and power, and to transform how we think and act in our world. That's no small task and that's why they need to be works of art. And we know that in order to produce great work of art, artists first become masters of their craft.

Learning the craft of leadership

If we get beyond the problems with approaching leadership as a craft, the next step is to confront the difficulties of how one might learn that craft. Based upon my own experience of learning craft and my reading of the literature, I think there are three elements of how craft masters teach craft. They are studying the work of masters, deliberate practice, and engagement with the medium of their craft. Studying the work starts with exposure – as a creative writing student every writing course included reading works in the genre – but also includes analysis and discussion of the techniques the masters used. I found the masters that resonated most with me, those who were doing the closest to what I wanted to do as a playwright and read and saw performances of their work. I spent hours dissecting those works, trying to understand things such as how Tom Stoppard manages to bring sophisticated ideas, such as complexity theory, alive in his plays. Stoppard's engagement with ideas is completely different than George Bernard Shaw's engagement with ideas, and I have learned from both of them. For leaders this is difficult as there isn't much in the way of craft objects (such as play scripts and performances) to study. There are biographies, but I generally don't find them very useful for learning techniques for working connection. Works about fictional leaders may be more useful – I have previously used the television series "The West Wing" to analyze practical micro-practices of leadership[68].

The second element is deliberate practice[69], which means doing it and getting feedback on how well you're doing it. The feedback is a critical element of this and distinguishes this from just doing something a lot. Without feedback that lets you know whether you're getting better at the craft or not, you are unlikely to get much better (you may get a little better). In most crafts that feedback requires judgment from an expert, which is especially useful if the expert can point to specifics about where or how to improve. This is the essence of good coaching. However, it is not the essence of most leadership or management coaching. Leadership coaches seldom get to see leaders actually perform and instead provide coaching

[68] In a chapter in "Leadership Craft, Leadership Art" (Taylor, 2012).
[69] I take this term from Ericsson's work (Ericsson & Pool, 2016).

based in leaders' after-the-fact impressions or before-the-fact apprehensions. Deliberate practice requires significant commitment from the person trying to improve as well as those supporting that effort. I have seldom seen an organization that is willing and able to make this sort of commitment to deliberate practice for their leaders.

The third element is engagement with the medium of the craft. Writers become deeply obsessed with language, with words. Painters come to know everything there is to know about paints. It is not just knowing a lot about the medium in an intellectual sense. It is an embodied passion about their medium that can seem a bit over the top to an outsider. This is difficult for leaders because leadership is generally not thought of as a craft and even if it is there is little consensus as to what the medium is. My stance is that the medium is connection, but that doesn't help very much as we have very little intellectual knowledge about connection, nor any tradition of engaging with it as the medium of the craft of leadership. Although most crafts have long traditions to draw upon, there also more modern crafts that have a much shorter history, such as photography and video-animation. These give me hope that a community's engagement and expertise with a medium can grow quickly.

Not so long ago, craft was learned in a workshop that was filled with apprentices who were guided by journeymen and the whole thing was overseen by a master. This is still the arrangement in many university labs, where graduate students are guided by post-docs and the whole lab is overseen by a Professor. But this is not the case in most modern organizations. The head of the organization may be concerned with talent development, but most do not oversee their journeymen – the middle managers – with the idea of helping them develop into craft masters. Some leaders may, but it is hard to help others become craft masters if you aren't one yourself and/or you don't think of what you do as a craft. So, we are left with the sense that the traditional ways of developing craft mastery are in the best case extremely difficult for the craft of leadership and in the worst case, simply impossible.

There is second difficulty with learning the craft of leadership. I have focused on individual connections with others, but in any organization of any size, there are (hopefully) far more connections between others than there are between you as a leader and individuals within the organization. In the same way that we can think of leading as being largely about creating culture and setting direction for an organization, it seems clear that creating and enhancing the conditions for connections may be more important than working individual connections. This is the approach that Dutton takes in her book on connection[70] in which she sets out three main pathways (respectful engagement, task enabling, and trusting) and specific approaches within each pathway which are all meant to create the conditions for high quality connections between people. Her approach seems reasonable and typical of how business scholars and practitioners tend to think about things like this. We like lists of methods and approaches, specific things we can do. However, if I think about this question as a craft master trying to create an environment in which others can practice and master the craft, I am taken back to the workshop and imagine that the real task of the craft master is to teach everyone to become a master of the craft of working connection, if I am to have an organization filled with great connections.

The dark side of connection

And not surprisingly, if we manage to create or enact an organization that is filled with great connections, there may well be a dark side to that. We can start to think about the dark side of connection with existing theories of gang or herd mentality. Connection that is based in what we have in common may well offer an explanation for many well know phenomena such as people's tendency to hire others who are similar to themselves, and group think. If

[70] "Energize Your Workplace: How to Create and Sustain High-quality Connections at Work" (Dutton, 2003).

connection is easiest with others who are most like us, it follows that it would be most difficult with others who are least like us. This implies that diversity makes connection more difficult. We know that managing across differences is more difficult, but also provides benefits in the form of a larger set of perspectives, greater potential for creativity, and more resilience in the system. Does working connection inherently lead to less diversity (in people, in thinking, in perspectives) with all that suggests? Or are there ways to work connection that take advantage of the benefits of diversity?

We might also ask, how do we create connections that also maintain a level of professional distance that is considered the norm in many organizations? Would that imply having boundaries around connection that many might find fundamentally disconnecting? How does someone who wants work to be just work interact with an organization led by people who want to connect and are actively working to create greater connections? In this way, is working connection another way in which the modern organization can be a totalizing instrument of domination where members have no part of themselves that is off limits to the organization and its leaders?

These are not easy questions. My gut feel is that there is a path that allows for both connection and diversity, that a craft master could balance the tension between different perspectives based in different life experiences and seeing things the same way. My gut feel is also that most large organizations suffer more from a lack of connection than the problems of too much connection, but I could certainly be wrong about that. And as fraught with difficulties as leading as a craft master of connection might be, it still seems worthwhile to me, and that to quote a local hero, we face the difficulties of working with connection "not because they are easy but because they are hard."[71]

[71] From President John F. Kennedy's 1962 speech about the moon mission.

Confession 9. Being a craft person

Resource Grubbing

It was the 26th of November 2019. I was in a meeting with the Provost and others about collaborations between the business school and the innovation and entrepreneurship center. I took the opportunity to talk about how short staffed we were in entrepreneurship (with our named chair Professor at half time and leaving, and our Professor of Practice not coming back, and our only other entrepreneurship faculty being in their first year). The Provost just looked at me with that, "yeah, yeah, yeah" look where he knew what I was doing and I knew he knew what I was doing. He had that little, "don't go there" smile on his face. I had taken a conversation and thrown in a plug for resources (since it was about to be that time of the year) and getting new faculty lines. It was the dean thing to do. It felt both oddly connecting, because in that moment, the Provost and I were playing a different game than everyone else in the room and oddly disconnecting because the Provost didn't want to play that game. It was an inside joke at best, or me taking a shot at the Provost that he heard, but couldn't respond to at worst.

In some ways, it was the most deanish thing I had ever done. But it wasn't about working connection, it was about grubbing for resources. I say it was the most deanish thing I had ever done because the way our finance and budgeting system worked, the deans didn't have direct control of much in the way of resources – we didn't have the authority to hire anyone (faculty or staff) without the approval of the Provost. We had very little in the way of discretionary budget. As a result, we spent a lot of time and effort trying to get resources from the Provost, who admittedly didn't have a lot of discretionary resources either (but more than we deans did). It's an open question whether grubbing for resources should be considered leadership or not. I suspect that I would have been more successful at getting resources for the school if I had been more focused on working connection, but I don't have any real evidence for that. And I think that getting resources for the school would be a good way to support the faculty and staff and supporting the faculty and staff feels like an essential part of leadership to me.

In practice, leadership, budget management, grubbing for resources, personnel management, and everything else you do as a middle manager all blur together in the day-to-day, moment-by-moment activities of the role. My real point in the grubbing for resources story here is that in that moment, I wasn't being a craft master or even an apprentice. As a leader, I lost touch with my medium. I wasn't focused on connection, I was consumed by the ongoing hunger games for resources that seemed to always be in play beneath the surface, and that game wasn't about connection, it was a zero-sum, win-lose battle to the death (or perhaps dearth of resources).

Practicing your craft

What does it mean to practice your craft and how is that different than what I was doing when I was grubbing for resources? There are many different scholarly descriptions of craft. I have offered my own summary[72] in which I characterize it as 1) having a focus on the process, 2) being based in a creative mindset, 3) being driven by passion, 4) being fundamentally collaborative, and 5) occurring within a domain.

When I say driven by process, I mean that the craft person is always more focused on how you are doing what you're doing and less focused on the outcome of what you do. Of course, the outcome is important, but how you get to that outcome is just as important. There is an underlying belief that a good process will yield a good outcome. When I look at a chest

[72] I lay out this model in "Leadership Craft, Leadership Art" (Taylor, 2012) and then discuss implications for leadership.

of drawers, I often look at the back of a drawer to see how the wood is joined. Has the maker used a dovetail joint or have they just butted the pieces of wood together and glued or nailed them? How much care[73] have they put into these joints that are not on display? That is one of the ways in which I judge the quality of the craftsmanship of the piece. When I was grubbing for resources I was focused on the outcome and not the process.

The second characteristic of a craft process is a creative mindset. The heart of a creative mindset is an ability to stay with your senses and be willing to not know. Both of these are difficult and contrary to our natural tendencies to want to quickly process information, form a mental model of what is happening and act based on that mental model. Staying with your senses means constantly paying attention to the sensory information and how it is changing from moment to moment. It means being present to what is happening and for the craftsperson it particularly means paying attention to your medium. When I launched into resource grubbing I had to disregard what my senses were telling me about the conversation in the room. I had to ignore my own felt sense of connection and instead act from a mental model about what was important for me as a dean. My resource grubbing mindset had none of the sensitivity and openness that is characteristic of a creative mindset.

The third characteristic of a craft process is being driven by passion for the craft itself. In that moment of resource grubbing I was not passionate about connection. I don't know that I even cared about connection. The fourth characteristic is the craft process is fundamentally collaborative. This may seem odd as we probably have an image of the lone craftsperson in their workshop for hours on end. But even in those long hours alone, the craftsperson is in a sort of conversation with the craft itself and all the masters of the past from whom they have learned. The collaborators may be represented by internalized voices rather than actual people, but it is still fundamentally collaborative in that it is heavily and continually influenced by the ideas and work of others. When I moved into resource grubbing mode I stopped being influenced by the others in the room, I stopped collaborating in the co-construction of the conversation and instead attempted to hijack it for my own purposes.

The final characteristic is that the craft occurs within a domain. Although the creative mindset may cross domains, the crafts person works with a set of particular, embodied skills that are domain specific. The glass blower knows how to shape molten glass, the woodworker knows how to create a wide variety of joints from half dovetails to finger joints. The leader knows how to create and enhance connection – or at least that is my hypothesis. Although I think that I do know how to create and enhance connection at some level, I was not drawing on those skills when I started resource grubbing.

One of the most intriguing ideas about of how to approach things as a craft master comes from the legendary martial arts and movie star, Bruce Lee. Lee famously said, "Be water." For me, that is good advice for any would be craft master – be water. And I cannot say that without also being reminded of a sign I once saw in Key West, Florida on the front of a plumber's office which said, "water always wins." I think plumbers and builders everywhere would agree. "Be water" was the unofficial motto of the Hong Kong protesters in 2019. When the authorities would move to their location with overwhelming force, they would rapidly reform somewhere else where the police weren't. They flowed, they moved with the situation. But that is not to say that they didn't have real influence. As Lee said, "water can flow or it can crash". I take the image of "be water" as way to think about and focus on what it means to be in the moment, staying with your senses and responding from your toolbox of craft skills in the way that the situation merits.

I don't think I managed to be water very often when I was Dean. Most of the time it was more of a hammer and nail sort of thing. Sometimes I was the hammer and often I was the

[73] My colleague, John McNeal once told me that for him the essence of craft is caring and it is difficult to disagree with him about this.

nail. That is, I tried to control things, to bend reality to be the way I wanted it to be. As I say that I recognize a heroic model of leadership in which the hero performs great deeds, overcoming tremendous odds to achieve their goal. The leader who seeks to be a craft master of leadership needs to have a different model in mind. It is a model that aims for Lao Tzu's best leadership where the people may not even be aware of the leader's actions. It is a model of leadership that takes inspiration from how water created the Grand Canyon, not with a design or even a plan, but with constant action that eventually resulted in one of the most beautiful sites on earth. Water plays the long game.

Or maybe not. Craft requires a focus on the process. And not every, not even most, of the results are works of art. Water creates a lot more small run-off ditches and annoying puddles than it does Grand Canyons. A lot more. It's easy to get seduced by the outcomes. It is easy to focus on the strategic plan, the vision, and lose sight of working the connections. Of course, that is not to say that the outcomes aren't important. Woodworkers work wood with some purpose in mind, whether that's a table, a chest of drawers, or just a shelf. Leaders work connection with a purpose in mind. The craft master keeps both in mind.

I see the leadership craft of working connection as being in a similar place to where theatrical acting was in the early part of the twentieth century. There were a lot of actors and a vibrant theater world. Many of the actors were very good and often – but not always – gave exceptional performances. One might even say that they gave inspired performances – but they weren't always inspired. The great Russian theater director Constantin Stanislavski[74] saw that as problem. It wasn't enough to hope that the actors would be inspired and give a great performance on any night. He wanted to find a way that actors could reliably give a great performance every time. His method created a language and process for actors that could create reproducible results night in and night out. The language was as important as the process as it gave actors a way to talk with each other about their craft. The Stanislavski method was followed by other approaches to acting that brought different processes and added to the ways actors could talk about acting with directors and each other.

Stanislavski was a genius. He was not only an artistic genius, he was a craft genius who could distill and communicate the craft to others. Not all – probably not even most – craft masters can do that. I once took a directing class from a theater director who I thought did brilliant work, a true craft master and artistic genius. But he couldn't explain how he did what he did or provide a way for us to do the same. It was useful to watch him work, and I learned a lot from doing that. But my deeper learning as a director needed the conceptual work that Stanislavski had done. The leadership craft of connection needs a Stanislavski, a craft master who can also teach us how to do it in a reproducible way. It also needs all those who followed him, it needs its Strasberg, Adler, Spolin, Meisner, Brecht, Growtowski, and Suzuki. We need the great craft masters of leadership to shine a light on the craft of leadership for the rest of us.

My own practice

In my own practice – and I certainly don't claim to be a master – I have focused on particular, moment-by-moment, interactions. Each one is different, but as I have reflected on them in the process of writing this editorial about connection, one theme emerges. It's been largely about overcoming barriers to connection. This seems reasonable, given that we are naturally social and connecting beings. Our ability to connect with each other has been described as part of the great evolutionary advantage that separated us from the other primates and allowed us to dominate our world in the way humans now do. It may be only part of that story, but the point here is that we are wired to connect, so removing barriers is generally sufficient for creating and enhancing connections with others.

[74] The story and method are documented in his classic book, "An Actor Prepares" (Stanislavski, 1936).

The barrier to connection that came up time and time again was power dynamics. Power dynamics come into play in many different ways and at many different levels. I am particularly interested in the physicality of the micro-dynamics of power[75]. My concluding point for practice is that we all, but especially leaders need to be aware of the power dynamics and consciously choose when to minimize them and when to use them. I do not believe that power dynamics can be eliminated. I came to this conclusion from interacting with monkeys in Malaysia. We were visiting the Batu Caves outside of Kuala Lumpur. As you walk up the stairs to the entrance, visitors are encouraged to feed the monkeys peanuts. We saw a cute little monkey sitting on the railing at the bottom of a section of stairs and gave him some peanuts. Immediately a much larger monkey flew down the stairs and knocked the peanuts out of the little monkey's hand. It was clear to me that the little monkey had ignored the hierarchy and the bigger monkey was reminding him of his place. Hierarchy, and thus power dynamics are part of primate behavior, and we are primates, too. We can make claims about being egalitarian and creating societies where everyone is equal, but I doubt very much that humans can actually enact social structures that don't have power hierarchies.

Within organizations, there is generally a lot of explicit hierarchy that is easy to see. We know who has decision making authority, who has control over what budget, and who works for whom. There is also a lot of hierarchy that is less explicit, but you usually learn pretty quickly who has power, especially who has power over you and the things you want to do. It is the nature of power that we often don't see who we have power over. We tend to not see the larger societal power structures (such as systemic racism and sexism) when we inhabit the upper side of those structures and we tend to not see the more specific power structures within our organizations. But we *can* see them if we are looking for them. This is a critical part of the craft of working connection for leaders – looking for and paying attention to the power dynamics in which you are on the upper side.

Overcoming power dynamics may start with noticing them, but that is only the starting point. Leaders have found various ways to overcome power dynamics to connect with others in a profound way. Jesus Christ washed the feet of followers to show that he wasn't better than them and that he loved them and was in their service. Presidential candidates in the United States go to great lengths to connect with the "common" person, from going to diners to have breakfast with locals in New Hampshire, to going to a pig roast in Iowa. These are both symbolic moves to reduce the power barrier that others are likely perceiving and tactical moves to create spaces where real connection may be more possible. For leaders, there are also times when they need to enact the power hierarchy and exercise their authority or privilege. Knowing how and when to reduce the status difference and when and how to enact it in a way that does not destroy connection is one of the great skills of the master of the craft of working connection.

In confession four, I raised the topic of fear and connection to our self. Fear and how it prevents connection to self is also a common barrier to connection. In some ways, it is actually fear of connecting to our self that is the problem. We have existential fears about not being worthy of love, not being a good enough person, and so on and it is our fear that others will discover that about us that makes us hide our "true" self from others. We put up defenses, we are closed off, we have our shields on in order to protect our self and prevent others from discovering some horrible truth about us. Of course, the vast majority of the time, the fear is unfounded, but our subconscious doesn't know that (nor does it care).

This is a barrier to connection because we're by and large pretty good at sensing when others are hiding something, when they aren't being authentic, when they are closed off from us in some way. When we sense this in someone, it lessens the feeling of connection.

[75] Which I have written about in a series of chapters and articles (Taylor, 2013a, 2015a; Taylor & Taylor, 2017).

To make the situation even more problematic, we are good at sensing this in others and not very good at being able to tell when we are doing it ourselves. I think this is an issue we are in some way very aware of in our culture[76]. I see the popularity of Authentic Leadership as being about a deep-seated desire to connect with our leaders and a recognition that leaders are often guarded and closed off – they aren't being real with us. The popular culture phrase "keeping it 100" is similarly about being real, about not putting up a fake front that keeps us from connecting with each other and to some large extent from connecting with our selves.

In many ways, the problem is made worse for leaders by others' expectations. We have a desire, perhaps even a need for our leaders to be strong, smart, unafraid, and protective of us. We want them to make sure we're safe in the same way our parents kept us safe – it's their job. But at the same time we want out leaders to show us who they really are, to be themselves, to be authentic, to be real. That is, as long as that reality doesn't include not knowing what to do, being weak and afraid, dealing with their own history of trauma, or put more simply being a fallible human like the rest of us.

I have previously[77] referred to the ability to manage the tension between being open and vulnerable and still meeting the needs of others as making leaderly choices about what to disclose and how to disclose it. I think that another of the great craft skills of working connection is this ability to be open and vulnerable in a way that is leaderly. It is the skill of the military leader telling his squad that he is also afraid, but that's not going to slow him down when they go into battle. It is the skill of recognizing the fears and anxieties that others have, admitting that you have them as well, and then framing them into the story of the group that you are trying to espouse and enact. It's hard and I have no simple guidelines. It is about managing a tension, much in the same way that working with power dynamics is about managing the tension between authority and equality.

For me, the practice of managing the tensions of power dynamics and leaderly vulnerability is based in a set of skills that I learned in the theater world. These are skills that by and large did not come very naturally to me (or at least they seemed to come to others much more naturally). They are skills that I often lost touch with when I was Dean. They are skills that the pressures to "get shit done" often pushed aside as I fell back into a focus on results and problem solving (that felt more natural to me and was honed in my STEM education). I think of these skills as being 1) connecting to my self, 2) staying with my senses, and 3) detaching from ego.

One of my favorite pre-show warm-ups in theater is an exercise created by Kristin Linklater called "I am here in this room." You start by repeating the phrase "I am" until you feel that you are connected to your self. Then add to it and repeat "I am here" until you feel that you are fully in the present moment (and not the past or the future). Finally, you add to it and repeat, "I am here in this room" until you feel connected to your self, in the present moment, in this particular space. It could take several minutes and I usually had the actors walk around as they did it. Once they were fully "here in this room", we could take the next step and connect to the character they were about to play. Of course, the first part, the "I am" is really more about reconnecting to your self or making the connection to your self front-of-mind and requires that you have already done extensive work to know your self.

There are many ways in which actors learn to know their self, such as mask work and guided visualizations of their life history. I ask my leadership students to connect with their selves

[76] I say our culture, but what I really mean is the culture I grew up in and live in as a white, male American. It is the most individualist culture that the planet has ever seen and has done nothing but become more so during my lifetime. Other cultures are different and perhaps less problematic in this respect, but much of the world seems to be taking cues from the American culture (which might be seen as American cultural imperialism), so sadly these issues seem to be spreading

[77] In a piece on authentic leadership written with Donna Ladkin (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010).

by exploring what is most difficult for them as leader (their edge of practice), why it is difficult and where and when in their life that comes from[78]. I ask them to tell a story about their edge of practice to their peers. I once had a student who came to me in tears and told me that she had discovered that she was selfish. She was crying because she couldn't possibly tell her peers that she was selfish. I spoke with her about how we are all selfish in some ways and that even though she hadn't realized this about herself[79], her peers probably had. She told the story and her peers loved it and told her how brave she was. Once she had done the work to connect to that part of herself, it was possible to connect to it again fairly easily.

The second skill is staying with your senses[80]. We all have a tendency to quickly move from what is happening in the world to our own mental model of what is happening. For example, when drawing a self portrait, we look at our own eye and then draw our mental model of what an eye is – which like all models is a simplified, generic version of reality – rather than drawing our own eyes and what they look like in that particular instance[81]. In this example, learning to draw is mostly about learning to see and stay with your senses (what you are actually seeing) rather than working from your mental model. As a theater director this meant learning to really watch what the actors were doing[82] and then be able to articulate what you saw. I once watched a directing teacher say to an actor, "it looks like you entered from backstage. Your character has just come in from the cold after a full day at work. I didn't see that." It requires a considerable amount of paying attention to see that difference and be able to articulate it. Most audience members would be able to detect the difference, but few would be able to articulate the difference. The point here is that the craft master pays attention to what is actually happening based in the evidence of their senses rather than what they want to be going on, or what they imagine to be going on, based in their own mental models (which of course, include a lifetime of accumulated biases and prejudices).

The third skill is detachment from ego. Detachment is often seen as a bad thing – he was so detached, he didn't care about anything at all. At the same time, many spiritual traditions suggest that attachment is a primary source of suffering and in some way we all know that to be true. For the craft master, it is the paradoxical tension of having great passion for your craft while also being able to detach the craft from your sense of self. It is an ability to care deeply about what you are doing and at the same time know that what you are doing does not define who you are as a person. You must be able to fail and learn from that failure and *not* have what you learn be, "I suck".

One of my more unusual hobbies is making up scales and then combining those scales into two-by-two matrices[83]. One of my personal favorites is the "Mudita – Schadenfreude" scale. It is about how you are feeling about others' success and failure. Full Mudita means you are taking joy from the success of others, while full Schadenfreude means you are taking joy in the failures of others. Behind the scale is an idea about how zero-sum joy is. Does an other's joy diminish my own joy or not? Detachment requires somewhat of a non zero-sum approach to the world. It requires that I see things as unattached or disconnected in that

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[78] I use a set of techniques described in "You're a Genius" (Taylor, 2015b).
[79] One way some psychologists think about trauma is as experiences that we have not been able to integrate into our sense of self. This sort of work doesn't have to only be about huge traumatic events. There are many smaller "micro-traumas" in our life that we fail to integrate into our sense of self and can be problematic for how we interact with others.
[80] The term comes from the work of Claus Springborg (Springborg, 2010).
[81] This example is taken from "Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain" (Edwards, 1979) and I share my own self portraits in "Leadership Craft, Leadership Art" (Taylor, 2012).
[82] Ibbotson tells a great story about intently paying attention to the actors when he first started directing in "The Illusion of Leadership" (Ibbotson, 2008) that is well worth the read.
[83] This is a classic and somewhat respected form of management theorizing. In my career, I have done this both seriously (Taylor & Hansen, 2005; Taylor & Ladkin, 2009) and in a more tongue-in-cheek way (Taylor, 2003; Taylor, 2014a).

my work is not me. It may seem odd to suggest that seeing things as disconnected is needed to be a master of connection, but that feels right to me. It also feels like it might be a craft of connection kōan worth holding.

Of the three skills, detachment was the hardest to hold on to while deaning. As a director or as an actor, it is not hard to be detached from the outcomes because the performance is ephemeral. I can try to learn from it, but it is gone – it lived in that moment and there will be other performances in the future. Any individual performance doesn't define who I am. But as a Dean, the outcomes did matter. Not just for me, but for all of my people. If I didn't get resources, when I didn't get a faculty line it haunted me for the year to come. It did define (at least partially) me as a Dean and to some degree even as a person. Intellectually, I can argue that that isn't really true, but in the moment the feeling is/was overwhelming and I was seldom able to detach from it. I was seldom able to take joy in the fact that Engineering or Arts and Sciences had been given new faculty lines.

These skills are about my own craft of working connection with others. As a leader, it is also critical to enact these three skills as part of how you create a culture of connection. The skills have to be more than skills, they have to be core cultural values. I think of the leader's role in creating and managing culture as enacting, espousing, and enforcing the values that define the culture. We learn culture from watching the leader, so it is critical that they enact the values. But actions are always ambiguous and can easily be interpreted in a variety of ways, so the leaders must also be espousing the values and helping others make sense of their own and others' actions in terms of the values. Finally, behavior or actions that are contrary to the culture must be named and corrected – the values have to be enforced.

The joy of the grind

It was in August of 2020 and we were interviewing candidates to be the Dean of the Business School. One candidate described themselves as being a grinder. They explained that they would arrive early, stay late, attend every networking opportunity – in short, they would grind away at deaning because that's who they were as a person. I believed them and in that moment I realized that I was not a grinder. Being a grinder is fairly common in the engineering world. In many places engineering education is referred to as the grind. My own experience of switching majors from aeronautical engineering to playwriting was about my own dislike of the grind. It was an advanced fluids course in my junior year that made me realize that. Each week there was a problem set and I would spend an hour or so with one of my fraternity brothers who was taking the course. We would talk through each problem, discussing how you would approach it, what theory to draw on, and what math you would do. Then he would stay up all night grinding through the problems to get the answer. I had no interest in doing that, so I usually went out instead. The next morning, he would offer to let me copy all the work he had done. I never did because I hadn't done the work. I got a D in that class because I did fairly well on the tests. In contrast to that, I was happy to spend countless hours writing, whether that was for a poetry class, a short story class, or a playwriting workshop. I was interested in the theory of the engineering classes, but couldn't stand the grind. I didn't care much about the theory of the creative writing classes (to the degree there was any), but I was happy to do the grind of the actual writing.

All of which is to say that it's not so much that I'm not a grinder. It's that I'm not a grinder for much of the deaning I believed we needed. Over the course of being Dean I came to believe that a significant part of our issues were due to a lack of connection to the community. By community I mean both the rest of the university and the local and regional business community. I believed we needed a Dean who would be outward facing and create and work the connections with the community. That isn't my grind. Admittedly, the work on identity and strategy that were needed when I took on the job was my grind and I did grind on it. I thought about strategy in the shower on Saturday morning and then spent the morning writing up what I was thinking. In retrospect this isn't too surprising as the identity and strategy work are very similar to my academic work as a theorist and my creative work

as a playwright. In all three areas I am trying to make sense of some aspects of our complex social world and articulate that sensemaking in a way that helps others make sense of it. The same thing drives my teaching and project advising and allows me to grind on those as well. It is what I am doing now as I write this (and I am good at grinding away on writing, making that slow and steady progress that eventually gets me there).

The practice of the craft of leadership has a variety of different outcomes. Just as one woodworker may be great at chairs, but not great at cabinetry, leaders will be better and worse at working connection for different purposes. One interesting insight that comes from Howard Gardner's work on leaders and creatives[84] is that leaders were very good at maintaining relationships with a wide network. In contrast, creatives tended to not maintain relationships when they were not directly working with the other person. This resonates for me as I identify with being a creative rather than a leader. And I came to the conclusion that the Dean I wanted would be a leader and create and maintain all of those diverse relationships in way that I was never going to do. I wanted a leader that would grind on those relationships and work those connections.

The term grind suggests a lack of enjoyment of the process. But I would say that it is also very related to finding joy. The famous writer, Dorothy Parker was once asked if she enjoyed writing. "I hate writing," she said. "I love to have written." I suspect that most grinds are like that. And in some fundamental way, the practice of any craft – even when you are a master of that craft – is a grind. But it is a grind that brings a certain type of joy. It is the joy that comes from hard work and engagement with your craft. For me, it is the joy of having written, the joy of having students grow and blossom, the joy of having put things out in the world that others find useful, beautiful, or good. It is the joy of having worked hard at my craft, of not having mailed it in, and knowing that I have given to the world what I have to give.

Throughout this reflection I have focused on connection as something that is independent of the outcomes. It's as if I have been talking about different types of wood and even variations within type without talking about whether the wood is for a chair or a cabinet. In practice, the intended purpose does matter and in leadership there are many different purposes. How we think about and work connection may be different for the philosophic art of identity than it is for the fine art of strategy or the marshal art of tactics or the performing art of persuasive communication[85]. I apologize for this and offer the explanation that I don't yet know enough about the leadership craft of working connection to offer much insight into how connection differs regarding different purposes.

I don't know that I will ever know enough about working connection to offer good advice on how to choose wood for a chair versus a cabinet. As I said in the first confession, I realized that I didn't want to continue being Dean and as I write this I am no longer Dean. But little did I know that getting out of the role would require me to work connection in ways that I hadn't before. It took everything I had, so I will now turn to the story of the end of my deaning.

[84] In his books "Leading Minds" and "Creating Minds" (Gardner, 1993, 1995).
[85] These are Grint's (2001) four arts of leadership, which is but one of many ways of defining different purpose and outcomes of leadership.

Confession 10. Sweet Sorrow.

The beginning of the end

It was the 28th of October 2019 and I was meeting with the Provost to talk about starting the search for a permanent (non-interim) Dean of the Business School. The Provost told me that he and the President thought I was doing a good job and they would be happy to have an internal search. An internal search would mean that it was only open to people within the university and also usually meant that there was someone they wanted to hire for the position. The university rules required that there still be a search process, but the result of the process was largely pre-determined. I told him that I didn't know of any internal candidates for the job.

The Provost seemed genuinely disappointed and even somewhat surprised. In some ways it felt like one of the more genuine moments we had and yet it did not feel very connected. It was nice to be appreciated, but it also felt disconnecting to say that I didn't want to continue in the role. It was as if we had gotten to a genuine and deep place of possibility and then didn't connect in that place. I don't think I'd ever gotten to a real place of possibility like that with him before. It felt bad to not connect in that space. It's sort of like the Provost was saying he loved me and I said, "thank you" back.

The search process

The Provost agreed to have an external search and I agreed to chair the search committee. Thus began a thirteen month roller coaster of a process full of moments when I worked connection well and also when I didn't. It started well enough as the Provost started the official process and the Faculty Committee on Governance sent out ballots to the faculty to nominate members of the search committee before Thanksgiving. I told the Business School faculty and staff at our November meeting that I wasn't going to continue as Dean. Several people expressed disappointment and I was asked why I didn't want to be Dean. I said that there were three reasons. One, I liked and missed teaching and research. Two, as an introvert I found the job exhausting and it was taking a toll on me, and three, I wasn't the right person for what the business school needed going forward – a more sales/marketing, fund-raising, implement and grow the current direction person was needed in my opinion. I also asked them to come prepared to our December meeting to talk about what they felt was needed and what we should be looking for in a Dean. We had a great discussion at the December meeting and overall there was a lot of consensus on what sort of person we needed and a willingness to consider non-traditional candidates, which is to say candidates that had not spent their career in academia. It became clear that a deep connection to and understanding of the university was more important than an academic resume.

The first big decision in the search process was about the search firm. Both Diane, the school's Department Head and I felt that in the past two Dean of the Business School searches, the search firm had not done a very good job of finding candidates. Both people who had been hired had been identified by people within the university and then contacted by the search firm. Given that the faculty and staff felt that connection to and understanding of the university was very important, it seemed to me that it was likely we – with "we" being understood as the whole university community – already knew the right person, even if we didn't know who that was. It turned out to be very easy to convince the Provost to not hire a search firm, after all they are expensive and it was an expense that would not have been incurred with an internal search. This left me, as the chair of the search committee taking on the role of networker-in-chief. Networking has never been one of my strengths, and now I was faced with what felt like the ultimate networking task. And the future of the Business School – my home where I wanted to spend the rest of my academic career – depended on it.

I started thinking about everyone I knew and wondering if they might be the Dean we needed. Although I was pretty sure that none of the tenured faculty wanted to be the Dean, the faculty and staff's willingness to consider non-traditional candidates opened up the possibility that one of our non-tenured faculty could be the right person. We had several faculty who were deeply committed to the school and the university and had a background working in industry – they had real management experience, which struck me as a good thing for a manager. I spoke with several of them and convinced a few of them to apply for the job.

Those were interesting conversations and were certainly an exercise in working connection. I didn't try to convince any of them. I chose to talk about how I saw the job, what it would take to succeed, and how I saw them. I asked about their own dreams and plans for the future. I honestly answered their questions about how the tenured faculty might react to working for someone who wasn't a tenured faculty member and not a researcher. Each conversation was actually a series of conversations with the faculty member taking time to think about what we talked about in between. In terms of connection it was about building a shared understanding of what it might look like if they were our next Dean. I was always clear that it wasn't my choice, but we all knew that my input did matter. I suspect that it was somewhat flattering and we all like to be seen as someone who could step up and do a difficult job, and it was enjoyable to honestly tell people that I liked them and I thought they were capable.

And at the same time, there was something uncomfortable about the process. Even though we all knew that there was a process to go through and that my job was to find several good candidates, it also felt sort of like dating and I was cheating on each of them with the others. I couldn't tell any single candidate who else I was talking to, who else I was wooing. I use the term wooing here intentionally because it did feel like I was trying to seduce them and connect in a way that felt a lot like a romantic connection to me. And if I'm being completely honest, the sense of exclusiveness and jealousy is not a completely unusual feeling around connection. I have often felt the twinge of jealousy after I introduce two of my professional colleagues to each other and they end up working together. Of course, I have made a point of introducing them because I think they have a lot in common and their research overlaps in exciting ways. But when they actually go off and do research together (without me being involved), I feel a little jealousy as if they each had cheated on me. It's ridiculous and it's easy enough for me to recognize it and intellectually dismiss it. Nonetheless, it does raise the topic of the ethics of connection. What does it mean to "work connection" ethically? Let me hold that question and return to it later.

In the meantime, I broadened my search. I quickly started to think about everyone I knew who might be a candidate to become Dean or know someone who might become Dean. In this sense, I used every connection I could think of to find potential candidates. Not surprisingly, my overtures were rejected more often than not, but it did lead to one particularly funny (at least to me) encounter. A trustee of the university that I had gotten to know asked to meet me for coffee in February. He wanted to talk about the dean search. I turned the conversation to what sort of person we were looking for. I suggested that it might be a non-traditional candidate, someone who had a strong connection to the university, maybe with an undergraduate degree in engineering from the university (which he had). They would have turned to business and have an MBA, which could be from just about anywhere. I then named the school where he got his MBA as an example. He quickly responded, "no." He then told me that he had wanted to meet because he wanted to take one last crack at convincing me to stay on as Dean. So, we sat there drinking coffee and trying to convince each other to be Dean. Neither of us convinced the other, but I still chuckle when I remember the conversation.

While, I continued to find potential candidates, back on campus progress was slower. In January, the Committee on Governance (COG) sent out ballots to elect the faculty members of the search committee. And then nothing happened. January ended. February came. I

periodically asked the Provost when the an official search committee would be announced and I would be told that he and COG were working on it. I periodically asked the chair of COG and I was told that they and the Provost were working on it. It felt like something that was out of my control. In retrospect it may have been out of my control, but I could have had more influence. I didn't know how to work the connection with the Provost or the COG members to make it happen faster. I sent the following message to the Provost in late February.

> I am very concerned about the timeline for the dean's search. This is my thinking (and please let me know where you think I'm wrong).
>
> 1. We need to have the on-campus visits before the faculty leave for the summer (so prior to May 15).
>
> 2. That means we need to make decisions and invite candidates to campus by Mid April.
>
> 3. That means we need to set a deadline for receiving applications by 1 April.
>
> 4. We probably need to have the position advertised for at least a month, so that would imply advertising the position by 1 March.
>
> 5. We don't yet have a committee. For the Department Head search, we had a committee identified by 15 January and we don't yet have an official position listed on our website that people could apply to. So, the process from having a committee named to going live with the search is 5 weeks and counting. If the process for the dean search is similar, and if we get a committee named on Monday, we're still looking at being a month behind the latest possible schedule to do the search this spring.
>
> If we cannot get a position posted by the first week in March, then the timeline would look to me like getting the job posted before the end of the spring, asking the committee to work over the summer, bringing candidates to campus in September with the goal of having a new dean in place in January. We would need to discuss my conditions for being willing to stay in the role for an additional six months (something I am not anxious to do).

To cut to the chase, we didn't get the position posted until August. It turned out there were a variety of issues that I had no idea about that were slowing down the process. My closing line about my conditions for being willing to stay in the role was a power play and was not connecting. I didn't feel any connection making the threat and I am pretty sure that the Provost didn't feel any connection receiving it. It didn't work, either. I agreed to stay in the position for six more months and the Provost agreed to support our request for new faculty searches in the fall.

Although the threat felt somewhat disconnecting, the bigger source of disconnection for me was the other issue that was holding up the process. I had my first inkling just before the board of trustees meeting in February when I was casually chatting with a member of the CFO's staff. She told me that there wasn't a line for a new Dean in next year's budget. The planning assumption was that I would stay in the role, so my faculty line would cover it. Even though, the search process was officially under way, the budget had not been updated and there was no budget to hire a new Dean. The budget had been a significant focus for all of the Management Council during the year as we undertook a major effort to reduce our costs by roughly ten million dollars in order to increase our discount rate to be more competitive with our peer institutions. So, the budget had had lots of scrutiny. But that scrutiny had not included recognizing that we needed to budget to hire a new Dean.

The really disconnecting part was that the Provost didn't tell me about it. I had the sense that it was "above my pay grade" and I should be patient and the powers that be would work it out. That sense left me feeling disconnected and angry. Which is not to say that it wasn't above my pay grade – it really was a problem for the Provost and CFO to solve and I don't think I could have been very helpful in solving it. It represents a class of problems that leaders have to deal with regularly. It was something that affected me greatly and was also above my pay grade. The Provost needed to have sensitive and difficult conversations with the CFO in order to figure it out and in a very real way I had no need to know the content or even the existence of those conversations. But I also needed to not feel infantilized and disempowered. I needed to have faith and patience. As Dean, several times I was in a similar position where I needed faculty and staff to have faith that things were happening to address their issues without being able to offer any detail or substance into what those things that were happening were. Those were weird conversations to have – I'm aware of the issue, the administration is aware of it, it's being worked, and I can't give you any detail – but the important thing seemed to be to have the conversation, to connect, perhaps all the more so when you can't connect around a common understanding of what is happening, what is being done and what will be done.

February ended without a search committee being formed and then came March. In March 2020, COVID-19 came and sucked up all of the oxygen in the room. Life as a manager in the university quickly became all pandemic all the time. I tried to keep the Dean search alive and to some degree I was successful, but by and large I wasn't.

COVID

The pandemic brought a couple of lessons about connection. The first was the perhaps obvious point that nothing brings people together like a crisis. There is a sense of connection when you are working very hard over very long hours to respond to external events that seemingly threaten your very existence – at both an individual and institutional level. There is an added weight of meaning to every decision and a much greater willingness to let go of individual differences and agendas and work towards the common good. Even when someone didn't agree with a decision, they were willing to support it because that was what was needed to be done. I was reminded of my time in the Air Force and in particular of the feeling I got from friends who were involved in mobilizing the Grenada rescue mission. It was real, it was serious, lives were at stake – there was no time or place for politics or power games.

This really stood out to me at the Budget and Finance Committee at the May Board of Trustees meeting. The normal dynamic at the Budget and Finance meetings (which I always attended as Dean) was that the CFO presented the financial status and the trustees challenged assumptions and raised questions and issues for discussion. At that May meeting, the trustees were incredibly supportive and challenged the CFO in a completely different way – more of a "what can we do to help" than a "have you considered this" sort of questioning. It felt to me exactly like the feeling I had when I talked to a friend who had just mobilized the 8th and 16th Special Operations Squadrons before Grenada. On that Saturday, I knew that both squadrons were gone (you can't miss the absence of that many C-130s), as well as the 55th Special Operations Squadron and the 60th Tactical Fighter Wing. I didn't know where they were going (I didn't have a need to know) or what they were doing, but it was clear that something real was happening – in short, we were going to war. I found out along with everyone else the next Tuesday when the invasion started. With the Pandemic I knew what the issue was, but like everyone else we didn't know how long it would last or what it would mean for the university. In the short term, students were told to not come back after spring break and the faculty undertook the enormous effort of moving all teaching online.

The longer-term questions were about the fall. Would we be able to have classes on campus? Would the students come back to campus? Would they come if classes were online? We are

a tuition-driven university known for its high-touch, in-person, project-based educational approach. So, there was a very real chance that a significant percentage of our students would choose to take time off rather than commit to online classes – it wasn't what they had chosen to come to school here for. If a significant number of students didn't come, we would be looking at a large drop in revenue and a major budget and cash flow deficit. We needed to be prepared for that.

Most of the budget modeling happened above my pay grade and I was thankful for that. But when the vast majority of your budget is people (salary and benefits), eventually the hard topics have to come into play. The university was committed to not laying people off, but we all knew that if things really got bad, there might not be a choice. The immediate deadline that came into play was the annual contracts for the non-tenure track faculty which followed the academic year with the new contracts starting in July. The Deans were asked to divide their non-tenure track people into three categories:

> 1-Most important to the university's educational mission
> 2-Needed for university's educational mission
> 3-Could be replaced using other resources (adjuncts/reallocation from TT faculty, etc.)

The task haunted me. When I thought about deciding who was a one, who was a two, and who was a three, my stomach hurt, I felt nauseous. It wasn't difficult to know who we could replace and who we couldn't. But the thought of submitting a list to the Provost, knowing that list could be used in future decisions about who to lay off made me ill. It also made me feel very connected to faculty whom I hadn't felt very connected – faculty with whom I often didn't see eye to eye. It was the faculty that I rationally knew fit into category three that I felt the strongest connection. That connection wasn't about seeing things the same way, it was about a simple shared humanity. It was about my own experience of being laid off and how horrible that can be[86]. For me raising the stakes increased connection. The more things matter, the more I felt connected to others. In this case, it was completely asymmetric as the faculty being categorized didn't know about the process.

What the non-tenure track faculty did know was the general situation – everyone in the country did and many universities were laying off staff and faculty – and that their annual contract renewal letter was late. They inquired, they complained, the Provost said, soon, soon, and time kept passing. One of my faculty took advantage of an early retirement program the university offered because at least it was something definitive. So, what was connecting for me, was disconnecting for them – to not know, to have their contracts delayed and delayed again left a lasting mark on their relationship with the university and I suspect with me as their Dean. I liked the feeling of greater connection with people whom I had had a hard time connecting with. And it was also disconnecting as I was forced to think of them in terms of the three categories – the categorization was dehumanizing because it stripped away all of their unique themness and reduced them to a one, two, or three. It was a sweet sorrow because it intensified both the connection and disconnection. I intellectually understood why the university needed to do it, and it was the worst thing I was ever asked to do as a Dean.

Finishing the search

Fortunately, most of our students came to campus in the fall and we didn't need to have layoffs. Meanwhile, the search process moved forward, albeit with countless small delays. By the first week of August we had the position publicly posted and applications and inquiries started to come in. I was the primary point of contact, so I spent a lot of August in Zoom

[86] I wrote about the experience in a piece on reflective practice with the catchy title, "Presentational form in first person research" (Taylor, 2004).

calls with people talking about the challenges and opportunities of the position. I tried to be as honest as possible about what the issues were and how being a dean at our university worked (which was different in key ways from how it worked at most universities). I also spoke passionately about the opportunity and what I thought the Business School could potentially become. Again, the metaphor that comes to mind is dating. The folks who were interested all wanted to impress me and get me to want to select them and I wanted to impress them and get them want to apply for the job. Most of them did apply, but I didn't get to select who would be semi-finalists. That would be a decision of the search committee, who hadn't spoken to them and only had their application materials to review. By the end of August, the search committee had selected ten candidates as semi-finalists, who would be interviewed by the search committee and separately by the Provost. That meant that some of the people I had been recruiting over the course of the spring were not selected to be interviewed. It felt like I had led them on, convinced them to apply and told them I thought they could be the Dean, and then had to dump them because the search committee didn't select them to go forward. I spoke with people who I had been recruiting who weren't selected and those conversations felt crappy. It had the feeling of breaking up with someone, telling them that they were wonderful but so were a lot of other candidates. Many of them had a strong connection to the university and I wanted to not damage that. And even though I am sure that they all cognitively understood the process and in the long run were even emotionally fine with not being chosen, it was painful in the short term. Painful in the way that rejection always is. I tried to be as honest and straight forward as I could be, but given the confidential nature of the search process and the discussions within the committee, there were things I couldn't say. I tried to act with empathy and honesty, but at the end of the day it was a unilateral decision by the committee and again the question of ethics comes up for me – particularly the topic of unilateral action and connection. If connection is fundamentally bilateral (even if it is not symmetric), in what ways can you act or not act unilaterally? Unilateral action in some way feels like the opposite of connection. And at the same time, we weren't going to invite the candidates into the process of selecting semi-finalists.

The feelings only heightened when the search moved to the visits of the finalists. The search committee had worked with the Provost to select four finalists to bring to campus for a day of interviews and a presentation. The President and Provost met the candidates face to face, but because the pandemic was still raging, the rest of the meetings were done virtually. I spent the day with the candidate while they used a room in the campus center for the Zoom sessions. After the Provost and President made their final decision, it became my job to speak with the finalists who had not been selected before the decision was announced publicly. I had pleasant talks with all three who had not been selected. One even thanked me for reaching out before the public announcement and told me that he was impressed that we would do that.

From all the people in the process that I had recruited and worked with and yes, created connections with that weren't selected, I only had one respond negatively. Only one responded from anger, and it felt to me like a spurned lover. Yes, we had chosen someone else, but I knew that it had been a fair process and that it had not been an easy process. I was surprised by the response and felt glad that we hadn't chosen them. It felt like the pain that can come from a unilateral severing of connection you care about. It felt bad to have caused that pain and again I wonder about the ethics of connection.

Ethics of connection

Although there is very little that I know of that has been written on an ethics of connection, there is some work I know well on caring orientations and an ethics of craft[87] and given the

[87] It is a piece called "Caring Orientations" (Taylor, Ladkin, & Statler, 2015) that I wrote with two wonderful philosopher colleagues, Donna Ladkin and Matt Statler which expounds on these ideas in much greater depth.

argument of this editorial, it seems like a reasonable starting place. The crux of the argument is that a caring orientation is fundamental to both craft and ethics. Caring implies being alert to the specific situation, that is the unique individuals and context rather than an abstraction such as humankind, worker, or manager. Caring is inherently embodied, it is not an intellectual process (in the way that business ethics are often taught as an application of universal principles and approaches such as utilitarian or deontological ethics). Caring also implies recognizing the relationship between the individuals and the larger context. These orientations of caring imply in turn, 1) caring about materials and a respect for limits, 2) caring about the process and pursuing quality, and 3) caring about the end-user and fitness for purpose. Of course, the three are intermixed in practice, but it is easier to discuss them separately.

Care for materials implies a respect for the limits of those materials. The craft master knows their materials, what they can do and importantly what they cannot do. For leaders this means knowing connection and not in a general sense, but rather in a particular sense. It means knowing that the connection that you can work with between you and I is not the same as the connection between you and Sally. Each connection is different, even within the same relationship, and the ethical leader must pay attention to those differences and respect them. It becomes fundamentally unethical to treat everyone and every connection the same – even if that is in the interest of fairness or following the rules. The care for the specific individual and the particular connection is paramount.

Care for the process implies the pursuit of quality. The craft master doesn't do shoddy work on the back of a drawer simply because it will never be seen. They are committed to the process throughout and make beautiful dovetails on the back of the drawer because of that. For leaders this means more than just not cutting corners. It means engaging fully, in a deeply embodied way in the process of connecting with others even when it might be expedient not to. There is often tremendous pressure to focus on outcomes, but the ethical craft master leader resists that pressure and cares for the process.

Finally, the craft master cares about the end-user and the purpose of whatever is being crafted. Craft is different than fine art in this way. A table might be beautiful, but if it doesn't serve the purpose it was created for, it is not well crafted. For leaders this means being aware that it isn't connection for the sake of connection – even though connection generally just feels good in the same way that beauty is its own pleasure. Connection is meant to serve a common purpose, one that is good for all involved.

At first blush these ideas don't seem all that different from tenets of modern management such as quality improvement approaches and a focus on maximizing shareholder return. But they are in many ways very radical. Care for the end-user and purpose means care for everyone involved, not just and not even primarily the shareholder or whomever the primary stakeholder is. The focus on process means the process matters as much as the outcomes. And care for materials - care for the connections between people – and the limits of those people means a focus on people as individual humans that can easily go missing when leaders focus on missions and visions.

Ending and beyond

The search process continued and the week after Thanksgiving, the university announced that a Dean of the Business School had been hired and would start on January 1st. December was filled with the usual end of term busyness, all made more complex by the pandemic. I was publicly thanked by the President and Provost in various meetings for my two and a half years of service as interim Dean. And then, on January 1rst, I was no longer Dean and I was on sabbatical.

My second to last act as Dean was to write an evaluation of a faculty's case for promotion to full professor. It was a joyful celebration of a great colleague and a pleasure to do – in

many ways the best sort of work of being Dean. It made me feel connected, even though the faculty doesn't get to see what I write about them. It is an oddly sublime sort of connection to something bigger than myself that is unaware of my connection. My final act as Dean was to let the husband and children of the faculty member who passed from CJD that fall into her office to take her plants home. It felt important to do it myself to honor her and them and it was also connecting, but in a profoundly sad way. It was the sort of thing you don't want to do as Dean, but you have to – or at least I felt like I had to.

In January, withdrawal set in. I still woke up thinking about enrollment strategies and other tactical issues. I spent a lot of time taking meetings off my calendar, with both a great sense of relief and oddly missing what they would bring. I missed the sense of importance that came with being part of the Management Council and being part of the discussion that happened there. I missed knowing important decisions before everyone else. I missed feeling that there were critical things that had to be done. I had also hated all of those feelings at various times, but as Jack Whitehead[88] would have said, "we're all living contradictions". I enjoyed weekly conversations with the new Dean in which I would fill in the back story around whatever had come up that week and offer what advice I had. But those conversations were at best methadone for my addiction.

In time, my new life felt somewhat normal. I started waking up thinking about the writing I planned on doing that day – that was the sign for me that I was really no longer Dean. The emails and phone calls that were a constant in my life as Dean slowed down to a trickle. One of those emails was from the Dean of Engineering, who included this postscript:

> BTW: I miss you as Business School Dean, but not too much, because
> a) I know you're LOTS happier now and
> b) The new Dean is a truly inspired (and inspiring) choice who is doing a fantastic job and is great to work with. Thank you!

And I was a lot happier. And also a lot sadder.

[88] Jack was a lecturer at the University of Bath and we taught together on the PhD in Action Research program at the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice. Being a living contradiction was at the heart of his educational philosophy (Whitehead, 1989).

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