

HAMILTON, JEFFREY DEAN, Ed.D. *Lives, Language, and Leadership: English Teachers as Leaders*. (2011)  
Directed by Dr. Kathleen Casey. 138 pp.

This study investigates the relationships among literature, educational leadership and teaching. A review of professional literature suggests that literature, leadership and teaching share the characteristics of meaning making, dialogue, artistic/aesthetic experience, transformation, and empathy. The purpose of the study was to consider current educational leaders interpretations of their experiences as humanities instructors and its connection to leadership in their current positions. The author reflects on preparation paths for prospective leaders as well.

Three life stories were collected from current educational leaders who previously served as English instructors. Narrative inquiry methodology was utilized, and texts were analyzed using selectivity, slippage, silence, and intertextuality (Casey, 1993; Casey, 1995-1996). Each leader was positioned within a leadership paradigm based on their language and interpretive experiences as leaders.

While all felt explicitly that their experiences as English instructors impacted their style and beliefs as educational leaders, textual analysis suggested that family background and personal experiences most influence leadership style and philosophy.

LIVES, LANGUAGE, AND LEADERSHIP: ENGLISH TEACHERS AS LEADERS

by

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A Dissertation Submitted to  
the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

Greensboro  
2011

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To all my teachers who believed that the kids from the other side of the tracks were worth the investment.

To my wife Laura, daughter Lilly, and son Silas who encouraged me when I felt discouraged.

To my brothers and sisters who never begrudged the fact that I had more opportunities than they ever did.

To my mom and dad who worked over eighty years in the mills in the hope that I wouldn't have to.

APPROVAL PAGE

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work would not be possible without the dedication and vision of Dr. Kathleen Casey. What began as an idea of possibilities became a reality through her guidance and enthusiasm.

I would also like to thank the other members of my committee: Dr. Rick Reitzug, Dr. Carl Lashley and Dr. Larry Coble for their patience and encouragement.

Last, but certainly not least, thank you to my wife Laura, daughter Lilly, and son Silas for tolerating me during this process. I hope you're as proud of me as I am of you.

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

Language forces us to perceive the world as man presents it to us

-Julia Penelope

The purpose of this dissertation is to understand the connection between language, leadership and the route taken by some of those who choose to lead. I reflect upon the possibility that persons educated in the humanities bring something unique to leadership as I present the life stories of three educational leaders who, prior to being leaders, were English teachers.

One of my beginning queries in my leadership preparation was exploring connections between academic disciplines and leadership. I recognized purely as coincidence a few years earlier that every principal I had ever worked under had been a physical education teacher prior to entering educational administration. What was the connection between prior teaching fields and educational leadership? Was there a connection? As I began to explore, I found little on the subject; however, my academic advisor recommended that I not give up on the subject or my interest. Eventually, I become more interested in the idea of the connection between humanities-based educators and leadership, but specifically those who were English teachers.



Eventually, I moved into a formal leadership position. Interestingly, I encountered numerous other leaders who had been English teachers prior to entering leadership. Each encounter reminded me of my students and those notes I collected each semester.

Each time I met a leader who had previously been an English teacher, I wondered if his leadership journey included notes from students who had gleaned leadership potential. Did they perceive themselves as leaders? And if so, did they distinguish any connection with leadership and being a classroom English teacher?

As the school year was winding down several years ago as a classroom teacher, I was going through the regular routines necessary for the closing of school for the summer. As was custom, I had asked my students to take out a piece of paper and write for me anything they wanted me to know. All of these students were just a few days away from being high school graduates. Several of them had been with me for two or more years, having taught them in earlier courses or advised them as journalism students. As I had been done a dozen times or more, I sifted through the responses as they filed out of the classroom on this warm spring day. I saw the familiar phrases such as Class of 95, Senior's rule, and Look out beach, here I come. However, I was drawn to a paper that had an entire paragraph, and it said this:

I really had a good year, and I learned a lot. You know what Mr. H? You're too good for this. *You need to be over this whole place.* The things we read in here and the stuff we talked about no one can ever take that away from me.

This one response remained with me for the longest—many years after that one class period and the others that followed. In the days that followed, I consistently thought back

to that note, and as flattering as it was, the part that kept running through my mind was the phrase over this whole place. Little did that student know that what he or she had written was at the heart of what I tried to be as a teacher- a leader of leaders.

I often pulled those written statements and reread them in the years that followed, and I started to see them in three parts. Part of it was a summary of the school year, another part was projecting the experience to the larger context, and the last part spoke about impact.

Through the years as I reflected on those writings, I consistently questioned why those students perceived me as someone who should be the leader of that school in title. I suppose most of our conversations and discussions in class were about decisions that were made in varying situations, and perhaps that was easily transferred to decisions they were observing by others around them. More importantly, I questioned how leadership was connected with being an English teacher.

I also examine and reflect on the connection between language and leadership. Ludvig Wittgenstein (1953) posits that language reflexively articulates and constructs the terms, meanings, and objects to which it lays claim; therefore, language is a game in that it has rules that we follow in using it. Pundy (1978) coined the phrase “language game” and regards leadership as a language game because leaders use language “to make activity meaningful” for others:

What kind of insights can we get if we say that the effectiveness of a leader lies in his ability to make activity *meaningful* for those in his role set—not to change behavior but to give *others a sense of understanding* what they are doing, and especially to articulate it so they can communicate about the meaning of their behavior (p. 95).

Pondy goes on to suggest that when leaders put the meaning of behavior into words, then the meaning of what the group is doing becomes a social fact. The suggestion is that language and leadership are closely connected.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this chapter, I examine the connections among leadership, teaching, and the humanities. A review of literature indicates some unique similarities between the humanities, leadership, and teaching, and these similarities form the basis for my inquiry.

Research suggests that leadership, like language, is about the making of meaning or interpretation. Smircich and Morgan (1982) wrote on leadership itself as a form of meaning making as a forerunner of symbolic leadership. Burrell and Morgan (1978) wrote of a new approach to leadership called the “interpretive paradigm” with reality being a perception of shared meaning that has little to do with “the ontological assumptions which underwrite functionalist approaches” (1978, pp. 31-32). Pondy (1978) suggests that leadership is nothing more than a “language game” that creates and offers meaning to people.

In speaking specifically of leadership, Howe (1995) posits that leadership itself is about bringing meaning to relationships among individuals and between them and greater entities – communities, organizations, and nations. This meaning results less from achieved objectives, rational planning, and manipulations of power, than from the dramatic performances, inspiring expressions of public concerns, and creative responses to unforeseen occurrences.

Daft and Weick (1984) noted that the focus of an organization's leaders "is to interpret, not to do the operational job of the organization" (p. 294). Similarly, Morgan (1980) claimed that leaders' frames of reference are highly affected by the assumptions and underlying metaphors, and Bolman and Deal (1995) talk about leaders' use of rituals, stories and ceremonies to infuse meaning into group or organizational life.

The humanities by its nature are the embodiment of meaning-making. Through the use of images, symbols, and rich language, they echo with multiple meanings. It affords the reader a meaningful experience because it allows the reader to shape whatever meaning he desires. Howe himself exhorts that literature provides a unique means of meeting the need for meaning and meaning-making within a text but also within the study of leadership itself (1994, p. 54). Drath and Palus speak directly to this when they note that leadership may be "more about making meaning than about making decisions and influencing people" (1994).

Language, leadership, and teaching are all dialogic enterprises. In his article "Leadership: The Socratic Method," Loeb suggested the significance of dialogue in leadership:

Just as the declamation, the harangue, the propaganda piece, is the work of the wielder of power, the adherent of a static truth, so must dialogue serve as the medium for the philosopher-leader...

The leader in the Socratic sense must of necessity embark on that give-and-take of critique which is the process of dialogue itself: *the leader's medium is indeed the message. ....*

Leadership is a dialogical movement in which both participants [leader and collaborator] engage in that process of critique – the love of wisdom- in which their very identities as the leader and the led are continually in question (Grob, 1984).

A piece of literature, of course, is often created through character dialogue, with the reader as an omniscient participant to the internal dialogue as well as entering into a dialogue with the text as a whole. In a narrative, the reader can vicariously experience emotions, shared or disparate feelings in an ongoing dialogue between characters. The text may stimulate an internal dialogue within the reader himself to the point that the reader is provoked into reflecting upon and even questioning his values, ethics, character, and mode of relating to others. The text encourages the reader to enter into a creative dialogue with it to question it, reflect on it, and even critique it (Howe, 1995).

Leadership, language and teaching also have artistic or aesthetic dimensions. For example, Eisner (1983) argues that teaching itself is an art rather than a science that requires great amounts of expressiveness, creativity, and insightfulness. Howe (1995) suggests that the humanities as literature allows us to see people, events and situations from multiple points of view, a most necessary corollary to effective leadership, and to do so all the while engaging in an aesthetic experience. Leadership as an aesthetic experience is not new, for some have suggested that it is an aesthetic experience in which its participants create something – purpose, values, meaning, feelings, structures, or patterns. Sandelands and Bucker (1939) refer to “the aesthetic possibilities of the leader’s job” and “leadership as an essentially artistic process” (p. 119). Duke even

argues that “leadership may be best understood as an aesthetic phenomenon” (Duke, 1986).

Likewise, all have in common the ability to transform. Burns (1978) said, in speaking of transformational leadership, that “they [leaders] can be moved to purposeful action.” The humanities certainly have the power to transform. In referring to language, Sir Phillip Sidney said of poetry that it includes “the end of well doing and not of well knowing only” (1968). That is, it moves one to action in addition to developing understanding. Cranton (2006) speaks specifically to transformative learning theory in teaching of adult learners.

Howe (1995) illustrates the intersections of leadership, engagement of the humanities and the incidence of imagination and vision. All, he contends are linked to creative decision making, divergent thinking, synthesizing information, empathy and understanding others and their needs, as well as seeing situations from other points of view.

The ability of the text to reveal to the reader knowledge of the self, the power and intricacies of dialogue, imagination, vision and meaning-making are all essential elements of leadership as recognized by many scholars, practitioners and educators (Howe, 1995).

Pondy’s (1978) suggests that leadership is a “language game” that creates meaning and offers meaning to people parallels with the nature of the humanities as literature. Literature is the embodiment of meaning-making. Through the use of images, symbols, rich language, it echoes with multiple meanings (Howe, 1995). As an aesthetic

experience, leadership is a creative endeavor as indicated by Sandelands, Baker, and Duke.

In the life stories of Donna, Billy, and Stuart, I listened closely for examples of the following common characteristics associated with leadership, teaching and the humanities:

- Meaning-making
- Dialogue
- Aesthetic or Artistic experiences
- Transformation
- Empathy



## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The story- from Rumpelstiltskin to War and Peace- is one of the basic tools invented by the human mind for the purpose of understanding. There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories.

Ursula K. Le Guin

In this chapter I define narrative research as a methodology along with its rationale, terms, and procedures. I outline the process for selecting the participants, conducting the interviews, and analyzing the text. Additionally, I define subjectivity and discuss how I tended to my own subjectivities as a researcher.

Narrative is the way we create and recreate our realities and ourselves through the use of language. Lieblich (1998) and Riessman (1993) both note that while the terms narrative and narrative research appear often in the literature of qualitative studies, it is rare to find them defined. Webster's (1966) define it as a "discourse, or an example of it, designed to represent a connected succession of happenings" (p. 1503). Smith (1980) says narratives are "verbal acts consisting of someone telling someone else that something happened" (p. 162). Polkinghorne (1988) confines his definition of narrative to an organizational scheme that is expressed in story form. That is, the process of creating a story and the internal logic of the story as well as the product—the story, tale, or poem as a unit. Sarbin (1986) also highlights the organizational aspect of narrative:

The narrative is a way of organizing episodes, actions, and accounts of actions; it is an achievement that brings together mundane facts and fantastic creations; time and place are incorporated. The narrative allows for the inclusion of actors' reasons for their acts, as well as the causes of happening. (p. 9)

Aristotle, in *Poetics*, noted that narratives have a beginning, middle, and end. The order of a story moves linearly through time with a disruption of the order modifying the original semantic meaning of the tale. Young (1987) suggested that causality is more vital than chronology, and yet others have recommended thematic sequencing; however, not all narratives are restricted to linguistic forms. Reissman (1987) noted several genres that do not follow the Aristotelian form which includes protagonist, inciting condition, and culminating events. She notes habitual narratives, hypothetical narratives, and topic-centered narratives.

Narrative inquiry is, in Clifford Geertz's phrase, a systematic study of phenomena with literary deconstruction of texts and hermeneutic analyses of meaning (Geertz, 1973). It is up close and personal in that it involves in-depth study of particular individuals' stories in social context and in time (Josselson, 2003). "It [narrative inquiry] comes complete with evaluations, explanations, and theories and with selectivities, silences, and slippage that are intrinsic to its representations of reality" (Casey, 1995, p. 234).

Narrative methodology is about language and its (re)interpretation. Unlike quantitative methods of inquiry, narrative is firmly centered in the life stories of individuals, allowing them to direct, interpret, and construct meaning.

Lieblich (1998) and her colleagues define narrative methodology:

Narrative research...refers to any study that uses or analyses narrative materials. The data can be collected as a story (a life story provided in an interview or a literary work) or in a different manner (field notes of an anthropologist who writes up his or her observations as a narrative or in personal letters). It can be the object of the research or a means for the study of another question. It may be used for comparison among groups, to learn about a social phenomenon or historical period, or to explore a personality. (p. 2)

Narrative inquiry experienced great attention in the 1980's, and influenced research methodologies in multiple helping professions such as medicine, law, education (Casey, 1995). Casey noted that what "links together all of these lines of inquiry is an interest in the ways that human beings make meaning through language" (p. 212).

Narrative methodology is of a dynamic and dialogical nature. Clandinen and Connelly (2000) note this aspect in their definition of narrative inquiry:

Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experience that make up people's lives, both individual and social. Simply stated...narrative inquiry is stories lived and told (p. 20).

### **Methodology of Language**

The understanding of experience and lives lived and told are through language; however, not through language as a transparent medium, but rather as a filter into and out of ourselves, overflowing with ambiguities. Halliday (1973) tells us that language has three distinct but interdependent functions. There is the ideational which relates the referential meaning of what is said. There is also the interpersonal function which

concerns the dynamic between speakers and allows the expression of social and personal relations. And then there is the textual function. This refers to the structure, both syntactically and semantically (Riessman, 1993, p. 20).

Riessman reminds us that meaning is conveyed within all three levels. Although ideational tends to dominate communications, the meaning of what someone says is not just content, but it is how something is said in the context of “shifting roles” of the speaker and listener.

There is no one true representation of language. Texts are created within and opposed to particular traditions and audiences and are on “moving ground” (Riessman, 1993; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Sosnoski, 1991). That is, “meaning is ambiguous, fluid and contextual, not fixed and universal” (Riessman, p. 15)

The systematic study of the language used by these former English teachers gave me unique access to the meanings they had given to their lives as leaders. I was able to move beyond numbers, tables and questionnaires into stories which were not linear, polished sequences of events, but rather a reflection of multiple realities. Their stories were not just a verbatim of events and thoughts, but rather a means of making sense and showing the significance of them in the context of the denouement (Polkinghorne, 1988).

Perhaps I was also drawn to my research subjects for the same reason that Josselson (1994) notes:

Students often come to narrative research because they are intrigued by the possibility of studying lives in a closer and more personal way, of trying to wrestle with the mysteries\_of whole lives, lives in progress, including . . . their own lives and the lives of people close to them (p. 4).

I was intrigued by these leaders' interpretations of the migration from a humanities-based discipline into a leadership role. Having been an English teacher myself and emerging as an educational leader, I was interested in the lives of others who navigated the same passage. I was able to examine my life story alongside of these leaders' story.

Lieblich (1998) provided a compelling reason for me to consider and select narrative methodology for my research:

*Because research methods should be always selected to best fit the research question, when researchers are asked by various agencies to address real-life problems, to contribute their expertise to public debates or decisions, it may be advisable to approach people whose lives are relevant to the issue in an open manner, exploring their subjective, inner experience on the matter at hand. Narrative methods can be considered "real world measures" that are appropriate when "real life problems" are investigated (p. 5).*

Narrative inquiry as a "real world measure" for examining the complexities of teaching, the humanities, and leadership in a human realm organized linguistically and narratively. It gave me the best access to those closest to the issues in which I was interested: Leaders who had been English teachers and their interpretations of those events, situations and possibly relationships that connected language with leadership.

Narrative inquiry is a methodology recognizes and values the commonalties in participants' stories. Through language narrative inquiry can recognize social groups who share beliefs and problems using a common vocabulary in the process.

I began my research on a premise that English teachers who became leaders spoke a common language as English majors, educators, and leaders. Casey (1993) notes that people think and speak in patterns, and other researchers speak to this same idea.

Gramsci (1980) uses “collective subjective.” Bakhtin (1981) refers to a “social dialect,” and Fish (1980) calls it an “interpretive community.” West (1982) prefers “discourse.” I am interested in social discourse. By analyzing the stories of these leaders I hoped to gain access to a common community of language which will be important in learning how they interpret their experiences as English teachers and leaders.

### **Narrative Analysis**

All the data, in the form of a transcript, was analyzed using textual and literary analysis. Interviews were transcribed and manually coded from the interviews. As noted by Miles and Huberman (1984), an inductive data analysis proceeded from noting patterns and themes. I examined the participants’ life stories and noted how they interpreted their experiences. This narrative analysis process is a systematic (re)interpreting of [others’] interpretations (Riessman (1993). Bruner (1990) relates narrative analysis to “how protagonists interpret things” (p. 51).

As noted by Riessman (1993) there are multiple approaches to analyzing narrative structures. One such approach, Labov’s structural approach (1972, 1982; Labov and Waletzky, 1967) looks at a “fully formed narrative” consisting of six common elements. The six common elements are an abstract; or a summary of the substance of the narrative, the orientation, which situates the participants in time and place; the complicating action; evaluation, the significance and meaning of the action; resolution, or what finally happened; and coda, a return of perspective to the present. Riessman (p. 19) notes that in Labov’s structural approach, the events of the narrative become meaningful because of

their placement in the narrative. With these structures, the teller constructs a story from primary experience and interprets the significance of events in clauses and embedded evaluation (p. 18).

In Stuart Poston's (pseudonym) life story, I used Labov's structural method in analyzing the text. Stuart's pattern of language moved interchangeably among Labov's structure. For example, Stuart would often pause in the course of his story and present his evaluation, or interpretation of the event. He then would refer to the present and his current leadership position before returning to his biography. He often transitioned from his interpretations of events to the present, back to the resolution of an imbedded narrative, and then back to his life story.

Riessman notes that Labov's structure provides a way of interpreting meaning:

Narrators say in evaluation clauses (the soul of the narrative) how they want to be understood and what the point is. In evaluation clauses, which typically permeate the narrative, a teller stands back from the unfolding action and tells how he or she has chosen to interpret it (p. 20).

In analyzing the life story of Donna Smith (pseudonym), I utilized a different process for studying the sequence events in her life and the thematic and linguistic connections between them. Riessman, again, notes the significance of this second approach:

The analyst identifies narrative segments, reduces stories to a core, examines how word choice, structure, and clauses echo one another, and examines how the sequence of action in one story builds on a prior one.

Importantly, the emphasis is on language- how people say what they do and who they are- and the narrative structures they employ to construct experience by telling about it. The approach brings into view the interpersonal context: the connections between

teller and listener that are the bedrock of all human interaction, including research interviews (p. 40)

Donna's life story is a very rich, engaging story that included several sub-stories along the way. She was very animated and engaged me as the listener in the telling of her story. As she would move into an evaluation or interpretation of an event, she would end by asking me "You know what I mean?"

She narrated among events and evaluations throughout her story, and a large part of her story was her interaction with me as the listener. Often she would draw upon our commonalities in making her interpretation. For example, in one of her stories, she tells of a student who reacted very emotionally to a simple question in the hallway one morning. In situating the student in the story as being in the hallway, she added "as you know, not all students get to class before the tardy bell rings."

The life story of Billy Jones (pseudonym) was analyzed with a combination of Labov's structural method as well as Riessman's language method. Billy's story was rather regimented with very few evaluation clauses. That is, he seldom evaluated clauses within his story. He returned to the present only once throughout the course of his story.

Having few evaluative clauses meant that Billy did not naturally, as part of his language, summarize or evaluate the events within his story. He did, however, freely evaluate himself as the actor in his narrative. He described himself as an outstanding communicator, leader, coach, writer, and etcetera.



## Key Concepts

The humanities are comprised of those disciplines such as philosophy, history, and literary studies and they offer models and methods for addressing dilemmas and acknowledging ambiguity and paradox. White (1997) notes that they assist us in facing the tensions between concerns of individuals and those of groups, promote civil and informed discussion of conflict, and place current issues in historical perspective. She goes on to add that the humanities . . .

[G]ive voice to feeling and artistic shape to experience, balancing passion and rationality and exploring issues of morality and value. The study of the humanities provides a venue in which the expression of differing interpretations and experiences can be recognized and areas of common interest explored (p. 263).

An English teacher is a teacher of language arts, that is, one who engages students in instruction of language. All of the research participants taught English in public schools or universities. In most if not all cases, licensure requirements of public educational entities require teachers to have a minimum of an undergraduate or bachelors degree in English.

Bass and Stogdill (2008) note that there are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are researchers who have studied the concept, and Bennis and Nanus (1985) point out that research has generated more than 350 definitions of leadership with no “clear and unequivocal understanding as to what distinguishes leaders from nonleaders” (p. 4).

Bass and Avolio (1993) define leadership as “the process of influencing group activities toward the achievement of goals” (p. 49). It is “influencing, guiding in direction, course, action and opinion” according to Bennis and Nanus (1985, p. 21). Argyris (1976) defines it as “effective influence” (p. 227). Clark et al (1993) relates it as “persuading others to sublimate their own self interests and adopt the goals of a group as their own” (p. 177), and Hogan et al (1994) refers to it as “persuading other people to set aside . . . their individual concerns and to pursue a common goal that is important for the . . . welfare of a group” (p. 493).

Perhaps the most inclusive amalgamation of the meanings of leadership is the list of conceptions related by Bass and Stogdill (2008):

- as the focus of group processes,
  - as a personality attribute,
  - as the art of inducing compliance,
  - as an exercise of influence, as a particular kind of activity, as a form of persuasion, as a power relation, as an instrument in the attainment of goals, as an effect of interaction, as a differentiated role, and as the initiation of structure.
- Definitions can be broad, including many of these aspects; or they can be narrow (P. 26).*

For the purposes of my research, I embraced this very broad definition of leadership in order to create wide open spaces for these leaders to interpret their events and interactions in relation to the humanities and leadership.

## **Research Participants**

Three educational leaders volunteered to participate in my study. All had undergraduate and/or advanced degrees in English, previously served as English teachers, and are all currently in educational leadership roles.

The first participant is a high school principal and previous North Carolina Principal of the Year. She is a white woman, and she was forty years old at the time of the study. She had eighteen years of experience as an educator. Donna Smith (pseudonym) is respected as a leader in both education circles and in the community in which she works.

The second participant was a fifty-five-year-old white man serving as president of a small, private liberal arts college in western North Carolina. Stuart Postom (pseudonym) was a first-time college president when I interviewed him, but he had several years of leadership experience throughout his career prior to the presidency. His journey from English teacher to leader was in the academic milieu unlike the other participants.

The third participant was thirty-one-year-old white man who was an executive director of a state educational agency that provides distance learning to local education agencies. Considerably younger than the others, Billy Jones (pseudonym) moved into a leadership position early, having spent only three years as a classroom English teacher.

These individuals had varied life experiences and were at various places in their careers as leaders. All taught in different decades from the seventies through the nineties, and their three life histories allowed me, through textual and literary analysis, insight into how they interpreted their experiences as teachers and leaders.

## Data Collection

Stake reminds us that the interview is the main road to multiple realities (Stake, 1995, p. 64). All three subjects were interviewed in the setting of their choosing. Donna invited me to interview in her office at the high school. Likewise, Stuart invited me to his newly-occupied office on the college campus. Billy was traveling across the state for a committee meeting and asked me to meet with him at a local Starbucks. We met there and conducted the interview at a coffee table. I asked a single question to each interviewee: "Tell me the story of your life." They were permitted to talk as long as they liked, and all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

In narrative analysis, selectivity is what the narrator chooses to reveal from his or her history, whether glimpses or details. Meaning is fluid and contextual, not fixed and universal. All we have is talk and texts that represent reality partially, selectively, and imperfectly (Riessman, 1993, p. 15). For example, each subject selects where to begin in the telling of his or her life story. In my research, all chose to tell about their early lives and upbringing, albeit in varying degrees.

Donna began with the city and state and moved directly into telling about her parents and the community. Stuart began with a reference to where he was born (Ohio), and then moved directly into his college years. Billy began with his home state and then mentioned his mother – by profession rather than name.

During narrative analysis, silence is determined by what the narrator chooses to leave out of his or her life story. Silences can be a very important tool in better understanding the narrator. The narrator, for example, may choose to leave out a particular event or

episode such as the death of a family member or the loss of a job. Kermode (1981) suggests that as researchers we must attend to silences since too often people do not hear the stories that they, themselves, are telling. Attending these silences may open up the story for an even richer interpretation.

In recounting the interviewing process for his first presidency, Stuart told of the earlier interviews for president positions, but he did not tell of the interview for the position he ultimately accepted. Billy never spoke of any relationships, personal or professional, throughout his life story. The only individuals he included were those who he mentored or supervised.

Slippage references to how narrators actively avoid or employ expected story lines or types of narrative. For example, slippage occurs when an individual claims a particular belief system but elsewhere speaks values from conflicting belief systems. This concept points to the agentive nature of narration, revealing how culture does provide means of narration, but individuals make decisions on what offerings they will use and for what reasons (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Slippage also occurs when one part of a story contradicts another part of the story.

Intertextuality is the process of searching for patterns and themes within narratives. Sociologist Bell (1994) states the importance of intertextuality to narrative analysis studies:

By studying the sequence of stories in an interview, and the thematic and linguistic connections between them, an investigator can see how individuals tie together *significant* events and *important* relationships in their lives.

The analyst identifies narrative segments, reduces stories to a core, examines how word choice, structure, and clauses echo one another, and examines how the sequence of action in one story builds on a prior one.

Importantly, the emphasis is on language and how people say what they do and *who they are* and the narrative structures they employ to construct experience by telling about it (as cited in Riessman, 1993, p. 40).

Attending to slippages, or inconsistencies, and silences may not lead to any new found certainty, but it can open up an event to expose complexities about the nature of others' experiences and their ways of interpreting (McAllister, 2001, p. 396).

### **Subjectivities**

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines subjectivity as “modified or affected by personal views, experience, or background.” Peshkin (1998) comments that for the investigator, subjectivity is “an amalgam of the persuasions that stem from the circumstances of one’s class, statuses, and values interacting with the particulars of one’s subject of investigation.” While subjectivity is inevitable in inquiry, even to the point of being like a garment that one wears, Peshkin asserts that as a researcher one must consciously attend to it and “systematically identify (one’s own) subjectivity throughout the course of their research” (p. 17).

The researcher should consistently tend to their subjectivities since they “have the capacity to filter, skew, shape, block, transform, construe, and misconstrue what transpires from the outset of a research project to its culmination in a written statement” (p. 17). Having stumbled on his own subjectivity through a study, Peshkin draws two distinctive conclusions. First, subjectivity is the basis of a contribution that results from a

“unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data.” Secondly, that he would actively seek it out versus “happen[ing] upon it accidentally . . . writing up the data” (p. 17).

Peshkin noted several “Subjective I’s” that emerged in the process of his research. He determined that his subjectivities were engaged when he noticed “the emergence of positive and negative feelings. These feelings served to move him to “act in role beyond those necessary to fulfill my research needs.” As Peshkin speaks of each of his “subjective I’s,” he remarks that these “may change from place to place.” Therefore he refers to this phenomenon as “situational subjectivity” (p. 18).

As I began my research, I was determined to also attend to my subjectivity in a meaningful way as well by systematically identifying my subjectivities throughout the process.

I made a list similar to Peshin’s of the subjective “I’s” of which I needed to be aware. I too paid close attention to my emotions and those “warm and cool spots” that indicated strong positive or negative feelings. I knew there would be some subjectivities simply by the subject matter at hand, but also by the locale. Being a former English teacher, I knew the importance of intentionality when interviewing other former English teachers. That is, I was aware of easy places for subjectivity to be present. As an English teacher interviewing other English teachers, in a logical sense, there is the obvious place for subjectivity. However, as Peshkin notes, there are other places where subjectivity lies that is outside the logical realm such as the English teacher researching other English teachers, but rather in the affective realm, or rather, those hot and cool emotional spots.

Below I describe and discuss those “situational subjectivities” that I encountered in my research. Just as Peshkin noted that his “I’s” were a “subset that emerged under the particular circumstances, (p. 18)” I experienced various subjective “I’s” of my own emerging from one interview to the next. This “situational subjectivity” came into play early, and I made a note of it in each instance.

### **The Max-Weber I**

I suppose my twentieth-century upbringing in a working class family manifests itself through my understanding and visioning of organizations. Weber’s (1947) classic notion of bureaucratic organizations influences my attitude toward division of labor and legitimacy of power. Having grown up in a small town divided physically (courteous of the railroad) as well as ideologically with socio-political lines, questions of power legitimacy often come to the forefront. Conversations in my home often revolved around the words or actions of the boss man at the mill. Those stories at times achieved folklore status.

Donna Smith and I conducted her interview in her office on a high school campus. As I waited for her in the lobby of the office, I became acutely aware of the rational Weberian organizational principles. The receptionist assisted both students and parents in an undersized, crowded office space while the custodian struggled to weave among the crowd to empty the office trash bin. When Principal Smith walked out into the lobby, the demeanor of the lobby shifted. Students, parents, and employees acknowledged with their body language that the principal was present.



Leadership lies in one's contribution rather than a role. In formal organizations which utilize traditional bureaucracies, I have to be aware of my strong personal feelings toward an impersonal structure that recognizes a leader based on a position within the organization. As I waited for the interview begin, I reminded myself of the setting and that organizational bureaucracies are others attempts to force structure on what may perhaps be viewed as non-rational behavior. As I began my research, I was able to look focus not on the organizational structure that framed Donna's position and title, but rather on the life story she was about to share.

### **The Naturalist-I**

I was a little surprised by the naturalist-I that crept up on me as I was closing in on the interview of Stuart Poston. The interview was scheduled to be conducted in his office near the edge of campus. The college is nationally known for its commitment to green technologies and environmentalism. My personal beliefs on environmentalism and conservation lie dormant the majority of the time. I participate in and encourage recycling. I purchase organic foods and products and seek to implement sustainable practices whenever possible.

As I studied a little about the college where Stuart had recently assumed the presidency, I noticed how I felt so positive about its mission and vision. I even remarked to my wife that this was the college that would be a "perfect place" to be. As I drove on the campus for the interview, I was stricken by the beauty of it. The campus sat nestled at the foot of the Appalachian Mountains with mountain peaks in the background. In

Stuart's office waiting area, I thumbed through various publications touting the school's environmental commitment and vision.

By the time Stuart invited me in for the interview, I was feeling quite at home, wanting more for a chance to ask for a job than conduct an interview. This feeling of well being had the potential to interfere with my attending to Stuart's personal journey to that place and the language he was using to interpret it. My personal philosophy of environmentalism had in effect hijacked my emotions and stood in the way of not only conducting the interview that day, but also analyzing the text. Those strong, positive emotions had the potential to overwhelm any chance of keeping my subjectivities in check.

### **Literary-Aesthetic-I**

The Literary-Aesthetic-I was an expression that I anticipated early in my research. In fact, I anticipated it as soon as I began focusing on a topic for my research. However, I was surprised when it appeared.

My Literary-Aesthetic-I is the part of me that views literature as high art and, subsequently, values anyone who has committed his or her life and vocation to the preservation of it. Those who do so identify themselves as English majors. It is based on the belief that English majors have a unique world view as a result of the breadth of literature they have encountered in their profession.

Considering my upcoming research, I thought about how an English major would interview another English major without bias. As I prepared for and conducted each

interview, I focused on the individual and the life story events and interpretations. My literary-aesthetic-I surfaced surprisingly when I interviewed Billy Stiller.

Billy related in his story that being an English major was simply the best route for him to achieve his career goals. His admission of a practical, pragmatic purpose in majoring in English was something I had not considered. I found myself experiencing a very strong, negative feeling during the interview, although not toward Billy personally. I remember feeling that he was not one of us, those who are aesthetically predisposed to good art. It also made me quickly realize the preconceived notions I carried with me into my research without realizing it.

It made me revisit the interview I had already conducted with Donna. If I had such a negative affect with Billy's revelation, had I also been overly positively predisposed to Donna who made literature as art a vital part of her leadership style? Fortunately, I became aware of my Literary-Aesthetic I prior to any textual analysis.

Identifying my own subjectivities and tending to them made my research richer and really impressed upon me how even common taken-for-granted belief systems and philosophies must be identified and scrutinized within the framework of conducting research.

### **Leadership Paradigms**

Through the telling their life stories, I situated Donna Smith, Billy Jones, and Stuart Poston into a leadership model based upon their recollections of interactions, experiences, beliefs, and use of language. Although this positioning is not intended to be

definitive, it does provide a lens through which to view them as leaders in contemporary practice.

Using the work of Leithwood and Janzi (2000), I found Donna's beliefs and interactions to be mostly like that of the transformational leader. She is a strong, symbolic leader who demonstrates high performance expectations for all members of the organization. She tells of her individual interactions and is constantly offering individualized support to students and employees in reaching their personal, professional, and academic goals.

Billy presented me with a unique leadership example that I had never encountered. Using the research of Rosenthal and Pittinski (2006), Bass (2008), and Kets de Vries and Miller (1984), I placed Billy in the framework of narcissistic leadership. Having never met Billy prior to the interview, I was taken aback by the impulsiveness, dramatic impression-making and venturesome language.

Stuart's past experiences as a leader, language use as well as his beliefs and behaviors in his current position closely align with Conley and Goldman's (1994) model of facilitative leadership. Stuart focuses on the collective contributions of everyone within the organization as vital to effective leadership. Specifically, he relates his first experience in leadership as a solidifying moment in the formation of his leadership style, and he speaks openly about the creation of networks across the campus and importance of continually providing feedback

## CHAPTER IV

### DONNA SMITH

Setting an example is not the main means of influencing another, it is the only means.  
-- Albert Einstein

#### **Introduction**

Donna Smith (pseudonym) is the principal of Bowen High and has completed one year at the helm. Donna and I are slight acquaintances. Some twenty five years ago, we were opposing coaches in a softball game when we were both teaching and coaching in high school. She more than likely was not going to remember me, but I remember her primarily for two reasons. For one, she was the coach of the premier girl's softball team in the conference at that time. Secondly, she was an English teacher. Being a coach myself, I knew of no other high school coach who taught English. When we met at home plate before the game for introductions, we chatted briefly, and that is when I learned that she taught English.

We had not spoken since that brisk spring day, but her name was very familiar to me when I read in a news release that she had been named principal of the year for North Carolina in early spring. What a perfect research subject I thought. Here is a successful principal who I knew had been an English teacher.

Donna Smith's story is one of the working class. She identifies early in her narrative how hard life was growing up and how she learned a strong work ethic through observing her parents and grandparents working hard as well as joining in with that hard work. That working class upbringing manifests itself in her language as she repeatedly speaks of respect, compassion, and understanding.

Donna talks passionately about living a life of meaning, having found her calling as a high school principal. She is student centered, referring to several students by name throughout her narrative, yet never taking herself too seriously. Like Stuart Poston, she is consistently out among her constituents.

The office was a typical high school administration office. There were stacks of books that had been received and other stacks waiting to be picked up. Carpets had been cleaned and the smell of various cleaners hung heavy in the air. After checking in and having a seat in the lobby, I noticed several awards on the wall. Some were for athletic achievements while others touted service projects and achievement levels on state testing.

Several people had crowded into that small office. In addition to the office staff, there were students signing in or out at the register desk, parents crowding around the front desk, and a custodian trying to weave his way through the crowd to empty the waste basket. I was stricken by the reaction of everyone in the office when Donna came out of her office, which opened into the main office where I waited.

The atmosphere of the office rather quickly became a little less noisy and a little less active. Students were quick to say "Hi Ms. Smith." Donna spoke to the students, the

parents, and then handed the waste basket to the custodian just as he arrived to its home in the corner

Soon, Ms. Smith greeted me briefly and invited me back to her office. I took a seat across from her desk, and she seated herself behind her desk.

I noticed her body language as we greeted one another. Although the large leather chair towered above her shoulders and head, she sat very small in the chair. The juxtaposition of her position as principal and her body language was startling. The irony was not lost on me as I sat in front of this larger-than-life principal from this community being swallowed in her chair.

The back of the chair towered above her head, and could have easily accommodated another person or two. Yet, Donna Smith is a giant in this community and in this school, credited with saving the school when the previous principal left unexpectedly for a larger district, taking a dozen or so staff and faculty members with her. Another twenty staff members left as a result of the others leaving. In all, Donna had to hire approximately thirty new faculty and staff the summer she arrived on campus.

“Can you believe this office?” she asked.

### **Leadership Style**

Donna is a very popular principal not only within the community, but also throughout the state, and that popularity is centered on her effectiveness with students, faculty and staff. She has a reputation of transforming both the schools and communities where she

works. This transforming leadership, actually labeled as Transformational Leadership, is recognized by Leithwood & Janzi (2000) as consisting of six core characteristics:

- Building vision and goals;
- Providing intellectual stimulation;
- Offering individualized support;
- Symbolizing professional practices and values;
- Demonstrating high performance expectations; and
- Developing structures to foster participation in decisions.

As a first-time high school principal, Donna tells of her encounter with students and their disbelief in their ability to achieve academically at a level with other comparable high schools. She established goals and challenged them to envision themselves being successful rather than “tater diggers,” and openly discusses the support systems that she utilizes. In turn, they moved from low performing to eighty percent proficient in three years.

She regularly provides intellectual stimulation to both her faculty and students through the introduction of books. She tells of initiating a book study with the football team as well as individuals who are facing difficult situations, as well as establishing her expectations for academics to be as successful as athletics. She tells her life story with its turns, twists, high points and disappointments—all of this with a dry, self-deprecating humor.



## The Interview

Ms. Smith began telling her life's story in reference to her family structure. She, being the only girl, grew up in a small rural farming area with two younger sisters. "I started out as the oldest girl. I have two younger sisters and grew up in Waltham."

Her father worked in a foundry while her mother worked in the local elementary school cafeteria

He took the hot metal out of the furnace, so I called it an earthly hell that he worked in. He came home every day with steel-toed boots with grease all over them and smelled like grease. My mom worked in a cafeteria at an elementary school – a cook for thirty-something years 'til she retired. And so, I grew up watching my parents pretty much go to jobs they really didn't enjoy.

Donna then talks about her mom, the community she grew up in, and reflected on what she learned as a result of growing up in that community at that time.

My mom says that when I was little that I would line my dolls up along my bed and she would go in and see me teaching to them and she said she knew I would always be a teacher.

There was not a lot to do living in that community in the early sixties, so she had to be creative.

I knew that growing up back in the early sixties out in the middle of nowhere we had to pretty much invent our own games and be pretty creative and spent a lot out of time.

Growing up in the country during the early sixty's required her to invent her own games. She described herself as a Tom Boy and remembered her dad's coworkers

visiting from the North laughing at how she could run across graveled driveways barefooted. “[They] laughed at us running across the gravel barefoot ‘cause he said he couldn’t believe we could do that.”

She recollected the community as place where she climbed trees and visited the bookmobile at the country store.

Climbed a lot of trees, and I guess one of the things that I really enjoyed doing was they had a book mobile that would come down to the country store and my mom used to take us and I loved going on there and getting books. I always loved the smell of books – still do.

Donna’s memory is attached to the smell of the books, and she lets that memory bring her back to the present. There she gained her love for reading on those hot summer days making her selections with the mom by her side.

She continues her story in regard to her mom. “I guess from her, I just gained a love for reading.” Reading allowed her to leave that small community with the aid of the bookmobile.

And I think then, when you live in the middle of nowhere, when you read books about other places and things, it really is the only way for you to travel, ‘cause when you grow up pretty poor. The only place we ever went on vacation was Myrtle Beach every year for a week with the whole family.

With books, she could travel anywhere without leaving her neighborhood. She mentions her work ethic as it relates to her upbringing.

I gained a real strong work ethic from my parents. My grandpa lived next door and they had a huge garden and so we constantly in the summer picked beans and planted

potatoes and we were pretty much farmers in the summer. They put us to work really hard.

Her work ethic is developed not only by observing her parents and grandparents working themselves, but by the work she actually performed.

Donna then evaluates her childhood and growing up in that small community with very little to do.

So, I think growing up there, not really having a whole lot to do, having a love for reading and all that, and watching my parents go to a job every day that they really didn't enjoy, I decided a long time ago that number one, when I grew up I was going to have a job that I loved, and I never lost that love of reading.

Donna takes two important aspects away from her early life in the community of Waltham. She observed her parents working jobs they did not enjoy and made a resolution to never be in that same position; however, it is interesting that she also took away her love of reading. The negative experience of watching her parents' hatred of their work is juxtaposed with the very positive experience of developing a love of reading.

She attended the local high school and particularly loved her English classes. She was an athlete and had considerable success- earning all conference accolades in multiple sports. "I played tennis, softball and basketball and was an all-conference player, and I also had a love for sports." As she was nearing the end of her high school education, she recalled that it was a teacher who asked her where she was going to attend college.

"College?," I asked. "I've never thought about going to college."

Donna is humbled at the suggestion by the teacher, and then tells about her experience with the prospect of attending college. “It was a teacher who told me that I could go. Guidance counselors never talked to me about it, never told me about the SAT.”

She started thinking about it, and when a man from a local college saw her playing a high school basketball game during her senior year told her he could help her get into a local college with a basketball scholarship, then she decided to go.

And so, I had planned to go to --- College but it was real close to home and I was a rebel and I wanted to be away from home. So, I turned down the scholarship and went to ---- college with one of my friends whose father had just passed away that summer. He had been killed in a car accident and he drowned when the car went into the river. So, she needed me and I needed to be away from home, so we just were best friends and we went to -----.

Donna learns about college, earns a scholarship to attend one close to home based on her athletic abilities, but turns it down to attend another college. Interestingly, she chooses the other college due to her relationship with a friend whose father dies the summer after she graduates from high school.

Ms. Smith references several significant relationships throughout her narrative. She specifies another relationship that was critical to her journey toward the end of her undergraduate work. She was contemplating her next step after having taken all the English courses she could take. She thought she would like to write, but journalism was more about deadlines, and she wanted to write at her own pace. That all changed when one of her professors asked her about working with athletes as a tutor.

Those additional education courses permitted her to complete her student teaching experience the following fall. During that time, she developed a special relationship with one of her students. Smith also references relationships with other students as she moved from assistant principal to principal, and mentions specifically students at a low-performing school in her first principalship. She credits her relationship with the football coach at her next high school in her position as principal as key to establishing an academic reputation on campus. Donna also mentioned her relationship with a student named Ellie whom she encountered early at her school during her second principalship.

While away at college, she recalled taking her freshmen classes and decided that reading and writing was her greatest love.

People were taking the classes in their freshman year that they had to take and I suffered through most of those and finally decided that my greatest love was reading and writing and so I needed to do something about that, so I took all the English courses I could take and majored in English and minored in Political Science.

Donna admits that when graduation came, she had no idea what she wanted to do with the degree. “I thought “What do I do now?”

She considered journalism

I thought about being a journalist, but I wrote for ----- [college] newspaper and I didn't like it when I wrote articles and they would cut everything out of it and it wasn't my article anymore. I really didn't like having to meet the deadlines. I liked writing at my own pace.

One of her professors suggested that she come to one of his freshmen classes and tutor some athletes who were struggling.

One of my professors said, “Why don’t you come and work in my freshman class and help tutor some athletes who are struggling” and I said, “Ok.” So I did that, and she encouraged me and I really enjoyed working with students and she encouraged me to go back another year and a half and take education courses, which I did.

She seeks this as an opportunity for service in helping those students. She finished in December after concluding her student teaching at a local high school near campus.

“It was a great experience!” she noted.

Donna then recalled one particular student, Howard.

There was one particular student there named Howard, that kids picked on a lot and I made a connection with him. I felt like I made a positive difference in his life. The day I left, he sent me roses and his teacher said he had seen just a change in this kid because I had taken such an interest in him. So I knew then after student teaching that teaching was what I was going to do because I really loved it.

Ms. Smith took her first position as an English teacher and coach. She taught there for four and a half years before returning to where she grew up to teach at the high school she graduated from. There she taught mostly ninth graders, but also students up through twelfth grade. “I enjoyed coming back and being around the teachers that I once had and now I was a colleague of theirs. It was a little bit of pressure though; it was different, but I enjoyed it.”

She loved teaching back home, and she honestly thought she would do that forever. “I loved my experience there and honestly felt like I was going to teach English forever, so I went to the university and gave up coaching basketball to go to school at night and get my master’s degree in English”

It was during her graduate program that leadership entered the picture.

It was some of my colleagues who said, “Why don’t you think about being a principal,” and I said, “*I never thought about it.*” They said, “We think you’d make a good one,” and one of them told me about the Principal Fellows Program at Charlotte, so I interviewed and ended up getting in that program.

Donna again demonstrates humility as the suggestion that she move into leadership. She had to take time to really focus on her academics in the Fellows program which she admitted was tough. She loved her law classes and her cohort group. “They helped motivate me,” she added.

Upon completing her administration degree, she completed an internship at a high school. Although it was a very different environment in which she had taught, it was a good experience for her.

It was a different environment. It was a very affluent community at the time and the tough part was dealing with the parents of those students who their parents didn’t think they did anything wrong for the most part. But it was really good experience for me.

She continued there after her internship when the system named her as assistant principal. She admittedly did not like being the assistant principal. “I wanted to be the principal because I really wanted to make decisions and do things without having to ask if I could.”

She wants to be able to make decisions and lead without interference from above in the organization. She holds high expectations for herself and wants to be actively involved in leading rather than being a passive participant, all consistent with the transformational leader (Leithwood and Janzi, 2000).

She applied for her first principalship at a school in which she didn't even know where it was located.

[I] didn't even know where it was. Somebody told me it was within driving distance; it was an hour from where I lived. I applied; I interviewed and got a call that they wanted me to be the principal. At the time, what I didn't realize was that the school was very low performing academically. It was an *all-white country school* for the most part and *very rural*. The academics were around 50% proficient. It was almost taken over by the state because of the low academic performance.

The superintendent had installed a whole new administrative team in an effort to prevent the state from taking over the school for being low achieving. She had just started her doctoral studies and was completing her dissertation as a first-year high school principal. "It was tough, to say the least," she commented.

Donna relates a story of her interaction with a group of students in this school.

The students there told me that I was crazy for saying that in three years I wanted to get them to get to 80% proficient because they were just 'tater diggers, and what did I expect from them – that *they couldn't do any better than they were doing*. So I put up charts all in the halls of where they were compared to other people and it really made them angry.

They came to me and said, "Why'd you put those signs up all over the school?" And I said, "I want you to see where you are compared to other people." And they said, "We don't like it."

The students feel as if they have no identities, but Donna is able to empathize with the students since she shares a rural, working class background with them.

I said, "Do something about it." So one day a little boy came up to me. He took the poster off the wall and turned it upside down. He said, "Now we're on top." I said, "Well, it doesn't work that way, but you guys could be if you wanted to be."



Donna again illustrates her humor, but does so while making a point to the students. They can be successful if they set goals and decide they want to be successful. Leithwood and Janizi (2000) point out that building attainable goals and high performance expectations are key concepts of the transformational leader. Donna then reflects on her story.

The students realized that it didn't matter that they were from the country, that they were just as smart as anybody else and they just had to be told that and shown that they could do it. The teachers also had to raise their expectations and believe they could do it. In three years we did get to 80% proficient. I think part of their motivation was that I told them that I would cut my hair in a blue Mohawk if they would do it and that was part of the motivation. I actually had to go back and do that for them because I had promised.

Donna demonstrates a passion for both learning and her students as she engages them in goal setting. After three years as principal, the school district promoted her to Director of Secondary Education. She recalled her first day on the new job:

When I was in my office the first day, I closed my door and *just wanted to cry*. *What had I done?* It was the first time in twenty years that *I was not around students* I didn't know how much I was going to miss them. I truly didn't. I loved teaching. I'd been in a high school setting since I was in high school, and I just truly missed them.

Once Donna gets away from students, she understands her sudden disequilibrium. As a student-centered leader, she is now out of her calling. At a conference for secondary directors, she heard of principal vacancy at a high school in another district.

After talking to some people, I decided I would come interview, thinking, *why am I going backwards?* I'm supposed to go to Central office and be Assistant

Superintendent, Superintendent and *go the route* that I had planned, but I came to the interview and I really enjoyed the people there, and they called me that night and said, “We want you to be the principal.”

In Donna’s mind, there was an expected pathway in leadership, and she considers moving back into the principalship a deviation of what should be happening. Billy Jones’s expected leadership pathway would be similar to Donna’s, whereas Stuart Poston’s route was not. Stuart’s path was more serendipitous and part of the higher education leadership paradigm rather than the kindergarten through twelfth grade model.

The previous principal had resigned to take another position and took eight teachers with her. Others thought the ship was sinking and either retired and transferred. In all, she had to replace thirty plus people, including all new administration.

Her new school was a tough place completely opposite from where she was coming. It was a very diverse population, and she commented that she “had to learn a whole new language.” She recalled a humorous incident when a student told her that she was about to “blank.”

When a student came and told me she was about to “blank”, I had no idea what that meant, until I found out that meant she was getting ready to go crazy and she actually kicked the Sheriff’s windshield out of his car. So, I understood it was bad if somebody said they were about to blank. Kids would talk about things and say *words I had never heard before* because it was just their talk.

Donna gets an impressive lesson in the power of language with all its ambiguities. She is able to interpret the student’s language at the expense of the windshield.

When she first arrived at her new school, the first group she met was the football team. “What I did first when I came to Bowen High has to do with my love of reading and my background as an English teacher.”

Donna then remembers a story from earlier in her narrative when she was an assistant principal:

I forgot to mention too that when I was Assistant Principal at -----, Russian educators came and spent a month with us and studied our school system. There were ten of them. And so in the year 2000 when they went back to Russia, I got a call from someone who said, “Did you work with the Russians?” And I thought, “Oh Lord, what did I do? I must have done something wrong,” because it was a government official.

Again, Donna with her typical humor demonstrates her humility in getting the phone call.

And he said, “We’d love for you to pay a reciprocal visit to Russia if you’d like, all expenses paid by the government.” And I said, “Are you serious?” And he said “Yeah.” I thought about it and I thought, you know, Russia’s not the place I’d pick for my summer vacation, but I would never ever have an opportunity to go again, so I said, “When does the plane leave?” and “Sign me up.”

So they picked ten educators from the United States through Partners In Education to travel to Russia and I spent a month there studying their education system and that was a really unique experience for me. I learned a lot. It was unique in that I got to stay in ----- with a family and go to their schools and see how they operated and I loved the *respect* that the students had for their teachers. Every time a teacher walks in a class in Russia, the students stand out of respect for the teacher.

This demonstration of respect resonates with Donna’s working class background where respect and authority are important.

They have a *love for learning* that I haven't seen in a lot of students in the United States, I think because they know it's their only way out, and sometimes our students, I think, fail to realize that. But that was a great experience.

Donna's emphatic lesson on language with the student reminds her of another language: Russian. She inserts her serendipitous world trip with her characteristic humor and reveals once again her working class upbringing. That is, students today do not have a similar work ethic.

Donna then returns to her story of transitioning into her current position at Bowen High.

The first people I actually met were the football players and everybody who came in here would say to me, "Do you like football? Wait 'til you come to an Bowen High football game. Wait 'til we play -----. You've never seen anything like it." Not one time in all of my conversations did anybody talk about academics; it was all about football.

And I know athletics is an important part of the school and I was a coach and an athlete, so I understand the importance of it and how it can affect the climate in your school, but I decided that I was going to set the tone for my expectations and my belief in how *we were going to be an academic school as well as a football school.*

Her first call was to the football coach:

When he came to my office, I told him I was the new principal and that we hadn't met, but *I wanted to a book study with the football team.* He wanted to know which book. Well, I said, I heard all the mills closed down, and we have a lot of poor families. I think some of the boys on the football team could benefit from reading a book called Escape from Slavery by Francis Bok. It's about his escape from slavery in the Darfur region of Sudan. He asked if he could read the book first, and I said yes. He came back two days later and said this is a great book. Where do we go from here?

Donna engages in some covert academics with the football team, a large cultural symbol of the community.

Francis Bok's book is a study in perseverance under extreme circumstances. Donna makes a calculated assumption that members of the football team would connect with the violence and excitement while learning about the value of resolve. Using literature as a humanizing element for the members of the football team, a group typically characterized as brutal and uncompassionate, also becomes a way for her to establish her academic vision for the school and community.

Donna was impressed with the football coach due to his willingness to have his players be a part of a book study. She bought copies of the book for all the players, and when they would have weightlifting in the summer, they would talk about the book. When the school year started, Francis Bok was speaking back in her old school district as part of a grant she wrote to bring him.

"So, we took three bus-loads of football players to meet Francis Bok and hear a lecture," she said with a grin.

She reflected that this was the most important thing she did as a new principal.

I think that was one of *the most important things I did* as an administrator here in this community because it sent a message to everyone that, "Wow, the football team, you know, who normally are jocks and aren't supposed to be smart and academically-minded, here they are going to a lecture and they all did a book study." It set a tone that how important I felt like academics was really in the school, and it set a tone in the whole community that we were more than just about football. So I think that was one of the most important first things I did here.

As a transformative leader, Donna determines that her vision of the school as an academic institution will be communicated emphatically in the non-academic setting of athletics. Football players completing a book study will be a strong visual symbol of her values as the leader of the school. She considers this to be one of the most important things she in the community because of the symbolic nature of it.

Ms. Smith then shared that she knew she had made the right decision to move from central office back into the principal's chair:

*I think I've found my purpose in life* and that is to work with students who are teenagers. I can *really make a difference* and a *connection* through *reading*, which is my *love*. I feel like as an administrator that it is important that you show everybody that you are a teacher. Every chance I get, I teach for someone in English or Social Studies – not math or science because they don't need me there!

Donna realizes that her purpose is to make a difference in students' lives through reading. Her love of reading and passion for transforming the lives of others permits her to use literature as an empowering presence with and among her students. She is able to raise the levels of consciousness of other individual's importance and motivate them to do more than they ever imagined a key aspect of transformational leadership (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 1991).

If a teacher is going to be out and doesn't have a substitute, I will *volunteer* to teach. Sometimes I tell them not to leave lesson plans and that I'm good to go if that's okay with them. Or I'll go teach a Social Studies class about Russia because I have lots of slides from Russia and I'll talk about the differences in our culture and theirs.

I think that has really gone a long way with the staff and students here that they seen me as a teacher too. When we do remediation, right before exams I always sign up to teach and I have a small group of students that I teach, either 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade English, for the end-of-course English test.

Donna, like Stuart, is out among the students, interacting with them. She then tells of a more recent event when she was awarded North Carolina Principal of the Year, but she stated that there was another award that meant more to her. The local cablevision company honors teachers with their annual “Star Teacher Award.” She recalled a phone conversation:

I got a letter from them and so I called them and told them they had made a mistake since I was the principal. They said ‘No ma’am, one of your Seniors has nominated you for the Star Teacher Award.’ I think that meant the most to me that one of my students in the school recognized the principal as a teacher. I never thought that would happen, and it was probably my greatest award of all. It meant the most to me.

Once again, Donna thinks there must be a mistake and that she could not be the one they are looking for. This particular award means the most to her since it came from a student. Not surprising from such a student-centered leader. She then narrates back to the present and her work as a principal.

I think it’s important that you make *connections* with kids and that you teach as much as you can in the school. I know that you’re supposed to be an instructional leader and I try to do SAT practice scores every day and send teachers SAT promo packs just to use as focus activities.

Donna uses “connect” rather than “communicate.” Where communication suggests transferring information from one person to another, she connects with them, thereby

communicating more than information. She's also communicating values, expectations, and opportunities. She connects with her students in various ways; however, she makes especially strong connections through books. Much like the bookmobile in the community of her childhood, her office becomes the library for connecting to students.

She then moves into another story.

But more than that, I remember my third day here in a new school, that I was walking down the hall and there was a young black girl and a white girl and a white boy. The black female was standing in the middle there looking at something in the hallway after the tardy bell rang and I said, "Why are you guys in the hall?"

And the girl whose name was 'Ellie' looked at me and said, "*Who the hell do you think you are?*" I said, "What did you say to me?" I said, "I think we need to go talk."

So we came to my office. I said, "Why are you being so disrespectful to me?" She said, "Why are you being so disrespectful to me?" And I said, "What do you mean? I just asked why ya'll were in the hall." She says, "You were looking at me." I said, "You were just in the middle. I was talking to all of you."

Donna never answers the student's question. Her position as leader is not contingent upon a title; rather it is who she is. Donna went on to say that she then understood that one must earn the trust of student and that she couldn't understand where she was coming from. Sondra's perception was that she was asking the black female a question and not the white students. "I realized that here you really had to earn the trust of the students and that I could understand where she was coming from and her perception was that I was not asking the white students a question, but only her."

Ms. Smith finally did ask again where she was supposed to be, and Sondra told her the library:



I said really? What do you like to read? She told me that she liked to read *anything that is real*, so I let her read one of my books, Gathering of Heroes about the riots in Los Angeles. She read it and I never had another problem out of her. In fact, she would come to me later and ask if I had read a certain book.

The book, by Gregalan Williams, is the story of a man who rescues two individuals from brutality and lawlessness on one day in history at a time in which he was coming to grips with his own upbringing as a minority in an all-white suburb. The story is the author's reflection on his attitudes about race and society.

A Hispanic student during the last semester was having a hard time at school and wanted to move back to Mexico because of her struggles.

There was a time when a Hispanic student last year was having a lot of trouble, wanting to move back to Mexico because of the struggles here and I had just read Jenna Bush's book, Ana's Story and I said, "I think you can benefit from reading this book." So I wrote a note to her and gave her my hardback book and said, "It's yours." She came back later all smiles and told me how much that she had enjoyed the book.

Bush's book tells the story of Ana, a young woman victimized by HIV whose mother and father die when she is very young. She struggles with poverty, emotional, and physical abuse. Through it all she learns that HIV is not her fault and finds forgiveness. Donna sees again a story of perseverance that can connect with the study. She tells about another student, a member of the swim team.

I had a swimmer, a senior, last year who was ready to drop out of school because of a family situation and I went out and bought him Lance Armstrong's book Live Strong and gave it to him – wrapped it up and gave it to him.

Donna then evaluates her interactions with these students:

I've just seen that so many times I've been able to use my love for books and reading and *my background as an English teacher* to reach students in a way I never would have thought and often times teachers because I'm always having teachers come in and borrow my books.

I don't know how many principals' offices have book cases, you know, with novels and things, but I really try to read a lot. It's hard to find time, but we always try to communicate with them if we read something really good. I'll find a quote and I'll put it in the staff memo every Monday. Last week I had one from Nelson Mandela and sometimes it will be from a book and I'll always put that, so they'll ask me about the book. But I just think that it's helped me a lot as far as making that *connection*.

She draws a cause and effect relationship between an English background and connecting with students as well as her love for all things reading. She then concluded her life story with a reflection:

So, my life right now, if I had to reflect on it and say anything about it . . . I told someone the other day that if I died today, *I have had the most rewarding life* and that I would have no regrets on anything that I have done or any decisions I have made about my career because I watched my parents grow up going to a job they hated everyday, and *I have the blessed life of getting up every morning and getting happy when I come to school*. When I get here, ***there's something that comes over me every single day***. I've never hated come to work. *I love coming here. I love the kids*. They are very needy. They need me and I need them.

Donna switches to God talk to express a reverence and gratitude about her life's work. For her, coming to work is a spiritual experience, and she uses spiritual language in describing it. She then reflected on Bowen High

It's a school where when you – I don't know how many schools you visit where a principal walks down the hall and gets a ton of hugs, but I'm that kind of person and I know that they need them *and I need them too*. And I remember one of my teachers this year said she had never been to a high school graduation, well, hadn't in a long time, and she came this year.

Donna affirms the mutual benefits of her situation where she and the students need each other.

She was surprised how many kids *hugged* all of the administrators when they walked across the stage and she said *it really touched her* because she had never seen anything like it, *that the kids really loved us*. She knew that they knew that *we really loved them*.

Love is a theme throughout her narrative. She mentions early that she loved the bookmobile that would park by the country store during the summer. She likewise loved going to get the books, the books themselves and “the smell of books – still do.” In relation to attending school she likewise loved her English classes and athletics. She loved her student teaching experience, and she loves her students. She loved the experience of returning to the high school she graduated from as well as a student taking graduate classes at the University.

This love was particularly evident after a job promotion took her out of a school setting for the first time into a central office job. She loves coming to work at Bowen everyday, and even the teachers notice the love of the students when attending graduation ceremonies. She comments on why she feels her job is so fulfilling to her.

I think that’s why my job is so fulfilling is because I think that I have enough *compassion* that it just affects the kids in a really positive way and the teachers, and I try to be there for them. Whether it’s a teacher or kid, I just feel like that I have a lot of *compassion*. I think the past three weekends I’ve been somewhere – two teacher weddings, anything that’s going on in their family or their lives I try to be there, or if it’s a student. I really felt bad – I found out that one of my students’ father died last week but I was away and didn’t know it, so I am going to call and talk to him.

She exudes a compassion that goes beyond the cursory requirements of her position as principal. She connects with them at a level that is founded on her working class background and passion about the transforming power of learning.

Donna concludes her life story by reflecting on the overall nature of her work as a leader in a high school.

Sometimes, you know, as a leader, you're disappointed. *Students disappoint you, teachers disappoint you*, but there are so many, many more rewarding things that happen to you as a leader and that's why *I think I've got the best job in the whole world*. It's the hardest. It can be a very *lonely* place a lot of the times, but it's also the most rewarding and I think it allows me to live a life that matters and so I know *I'm doing what I'm supposed to do* – what I was meant to do in life and *I'm blessed* that I can go to a job every day that I love, which is what I had always said I was going to do growing up.

Donna as the principal is able in her position to see disappointment from both sides: students and teachers. Regardless, she is situated in her leadership position as a vocation and describes it as a calling from God.

## CHAPTER V

### BILLY JONES

Always mystify, mislead and surprise the enemy if possible.

-General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson

#### **Introduction**

Billy Jones (pseudonym) is a man on a mission, and his life story is about his achievements and his accolades. He says he was recognized early for his reading, writing, and speaking acumen, and he makes short the work moving through various organizations and leadership positions. He is an assistant principal at twenty-seven, a principal at thirty, and a central office administrator at thirty one. He was suggested to me as a possible interview from a former colleague who was a classmate of his during graduate school.

Billy uses code words in his language. For example, he uses the word “communication”, or some variation of it, to mean the giving of information, rather than the free flow of meaning between two individuals or groups. He uses “utilize” for exploit rather than develop. He uses “mentor” for stepping stone as he climbs the career ladder. He employs percussive language when he refers to “knocking” something out, “knocking down barriers,” or opportunities “knocking,” emphasizing power or forcefulness.

## **Leadership Style**

His use of language suggests that his leadership style was of the narcissistic variety. Narcissistic leadership is defined as “leaders’ actions principally motivated by their own egomaniacal needs and beliefs, superseding the needs and interests of the constituents and institutions they lead” (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006, p. 629).

Characteristics of narcissistic leadership according to Bass (2008) include

- Dramatic impression-making
- Expressing emotions excessively
- Incessantly drawing attention to self

Kets de vries & Miller (1984) describes these leaders as:

[H]yperactive, impulsive, dramatically venturesome, and dangerously uninhibited. They live in a world of hunches and impressions rather than facts as they address a broad array of widely disparate projects, products, and markets in desultory fashion. The leader’s flare for the dramatics leads them to centralize power, allowing them to initiate bold venture independently... Instead of reacting to the environment (when at the top of the organization) the leader, often an entrepreneur, attempts to enact his own environment. . . Unbridled growth is the goal. The top man wants to be at center stage, putting on a show. . . He wants to finally show “the others over there” how great an executive he really is (p. 158).

## **The Interview**

Billy agrees to meet with me at a local coffee shop since he was en route to making a presentation to a local education agency. The newly appointed executive director of a state-level learning initiative, he is constantly crossing the state meeting with school superintendents and local politicians.

Billy tells his story within a sense of *false modesty* and proceeds through the narrative with very little variance from the plot of his story. He marks the passage of time by referring to himself by his age. For example, when he tells of accepting a new position, he begins with “At 26. . .”. However, the most intriguing aspect of the interview is *his body language*.

He sits across from me at a table in the corner of the coffee shop. As he begins telling his story, he sits on the front edge of his chair and rests his elbows on the edge of the table. He tells his story as if he has told it a hundred times before. He keeps his hands folded throughout his presentation.

Billy is dressed in a dark colored suit, and it stands out even more in a trendy coffee shop just before lunch. He makes a dramatic entrance into the store, throwing open the door wide. He doesn't bother to remove his coat, and he carries nothing with him. Intuitively, I know who he is when he comes through the doorway. I stand to greet him as he announces my name and says he is glad to meet me. He motions to a table nearby and he begins his tale. He is the center of attention in this place, and it is show time. Throughout the following text, I use italics for the purpose of emphasis.

I think it's probably appropriate to start with my upbringing was from an English teacher in Mississippi who now is in her 34<sup>th</sup> year as an English teacher. Her name is ---- She's my mother and from a very early age, books, reading, movies, things that were comparable to the arts, *speaking*, and *drama* were a part of my life.

So, one of the things that I became very adept at a very early age was *public speaking*, you know. Almost from sixth grade on ran for Student Council posts and any projects that I would be doing I always was *the lead presenter or author or researcher*. Those were things that appealed to me.

Billy describes himself as a leader from the sixth grade on due to his constant involvement as lead presenter, author or researcher. He not only talks about holding these positions, but he also refers his mother as an English teacher in Mississippi with thirty-four years of experience before he mentioned her by name, suggesting what she does is more important than who she is. He employs ego language immediately and suggests that he was always the lead as if it was inborn.

When *your* mother's an English teacher and *you* begin to like reading and like writing, *you're* going to get *more in-depth* with your interest in studying it. Like a lot of kids, *you* really don't know what that means at that time. *My* first proclivity was towards law. She had had *some lawyers in her family* and *I began* to look into that, and low and behold, English was a primary major for that. And, as I went through college, I knew I wanted to be an English major but a lot of the things that began to happen to me at college really started to happen in high school too.

He does not spend much here on his career choice before moving to the “things” that began happening to him in college and high school.

*I was always* a president, or a captain, or head of this church organization, or whatever and the reason I was is because at a very fundamental level, *I was an outstanding communicator*.

As a self-proclaimed “outstanding communicator,” Billy felt he had leadership roles due to his ability to communicate, and it was a congenital gift.

So when people would assemble or people would try to get a message broken down, or when people would have concerns about a complex problem, *I really believe at a very early age* that literature allowed me to be *a very early systems thinker*. When you look for things like setting and characterization and plot and metaphors, *you tend to see connections* that other people don't see. The other issue is that that translates into



how you communicate it whether it be the written or spoken word. So I've always had an interest in writing as well.

Billy reiterates the innateness of his skill by repeating early. Not only did he have the skill of language, but he also had the ability to see the big picture in system's theory—suggesting that others would not have that natural ability to see these connections. Billy's narrative moves right into his college career.

When I got to my junior year in college, I began to work with groups of soccer players. I had been a soccer player in high school and college and I began to do a little coaching. I began to have jobs in college where I was very fortunate to oversee other people and to train them and communicate to them. And probably around my junior year, I began to think that law was more about those connections for a single end in terms of reading, writing and speaking, whether it would be to win a case or whether it would be to do contract law, and I realized I wanted to work with people and lead people.

His opportunities for leadership increased through his involvement with athletics during college and his working opportunities. He realizes that a career in law will perhaps lead to a single outcome such as winning, which is important, but not as important as leading (or manipulating) people.

So at that time, there was a real dilemma to whether or not I would go Business or Education, because I felt like those were the two fields that I could really make an impact in with *my skills set*. And I began to hone that skills set down into three things.

Again, he refers to his skill set as an innate advantage for him, but he also decides to refine them. He elaborates on three issues related to his talents: the first one is.

From a reading standpoint, from a literacy standpoint, English majors so “get” the concept that it is not about reading for information. It’s always *for us* been about reading to understand and learn and then translate that to somebody else.

He puts himself into the category of those who “get it,” as opposed to other who do not.

He identifies himself with me as a fellow English major at this point in his story for the first time as a dialogic relationship. The second skill set he chooses to polish is

I learned about myself is that I had an impact on what I wrote and the words that I used to others. You know, writing became a big part, getting published became a big part of what I wanted to do, but also in my informal communications, how I could influence people with my written word.

He doesn’t identify another skill, rather he returns to ego language in talking about himself. Billy identifies himself as persuasive due to his writing and speaking skills. He wants to get published, perhaps for recognition rather than for influencing others. The third skill he began to shine

And then lastly I began to realize that . . . there were a lot of managers out there but *there were not a lot of people* that could really communicate leadership, that could *really sell* it to other folks and get them to *buy into it*.

He distinguishes managers and leaders in reference to communications, but more importantly, leadership is communicated for Billy when other people are persuaded and “buy in” or devote themselves as followers. Persuading people to do what the leader wants is a key component to leadership for him. For the first time, he mentions currency.

Currency comes in many forms for him. His advanced skill set and natural born leadership is a form of social cash, and he speaks of what he has the ability to do as a language currency.

I knew that I needed to hone those skills and a lot of the business opportunities I was looking at as a junior really involved a lot of things that I was not interested in an empirical nature. Numbers, quantifying products, that was not as interesting as teaching.

For the first time, Billy mentions teaching as a career choice. Again, it is related as a contrast to what he's not interested in. He associates business as an empirical enterprise (numbers) and not nearly as interesting as teaching. Perhaps he realizes that he cannot influence numbers whereas he has the skill set to persuade people.

So when I became interested in teaching, much like in high school and college, the story turns to learning who you are as a teacher in the first couple of years. And what I found out is that within about two years of my practice as a teacher, I had a *unique ability* to move teens and students towards *uncommon results*.

Interestingly, Billy notes that the story turns to learning who one is as a teacher, yet he learns less about whom he is a teacher and more about the results his students produce. His use of "unique" and "uncommon" underscores his unhealthy opinion of his abilities.

This was early phases of the 90s, a little before accountability, around '93, '94, but my student results at that time whether it be success on grades or SATs were very high. And I began to *take* a lot of feedback from students even then and began to communicate with them in a way that was not pedantic or dictatorial, and I really didn't know what I had as a style at that point, but I knew it was effective. *I didn't have any discipline problems; I just was effective.*

Billy “takes” feedback rather than receives it, and he attributes his effectiveness to his style even though he did not know what it was. He demonstrates either or thinking in his language with a continuum. Discipline problems are at the other end of the spectrum from effectiveness in Billy’s mind. He then relates his involvement with athletics in relation to his ability to communicate:

As a coach, I came into this notion of leading organizations. I inherited a soccer program in football-crazy ----- County that had never had a winning season. It was three years old; it was just the men’s soccer program. By the time I would leave six years later, the men’s program was nationally ranked and both the men and women were state-ranked in the top five.

And through leading that organization, I had a mini-taste of what it was like to motivate people by teaching them to understand the concepts, communicating with them effectively through the written and spoken word, and also turning them on to other things that broaden their experience through literature. I was a *real unique* coach in that every year we read a book, you know, whether it was Pat Riley’s Winner Within or Coach K’s Leading from the Heart, or Dean Smith’s Four Corners and we would talk about scenarios that pertained to sport.

He credits his communication skills in motivating them to be successful and revels in his accolades. He utilized literature by having the team to read a book each year. Again, he uses unique when he describes himself as a “real unique” coach suggesting that what he can do as a leader is restricted to him. He then returns to his ability as a teacher in the classroom.

As an English teacher, all of my projects were project-based. I began to branch out into stronger *systems thinking*; how could I connect these units and projects across paradigms in literacy? Not just to accomplish a goal, but how could I do that?

Systems' thinking is defined as "the art and science of making reliable inferences about behavior by developing an increasingly deep understanding of underlying structure" (Richmond, 2000). Billy is interested "big picture" thinking, examining how the various parts fit into a whole. Implementing systems' theory involves the manipulation of behavior in order for the system to operate in whole. He is examining how the parts can be influenced with his uniquely developed skill set to achieve more than just a goal. Interestingly, he doesn't reveal what more he would like to accomplish here.

So, admittedly, as I honed those skills, people began to tap me for leadership posts, whether it be school improvement chair, which I served on, whether it be a district technology team, which I served on, I became involved in a lot of opportunities that a lot of educators look at and say, "Well that's just one more thing to do." I saw them as vehicles to really *span my reach* to other adults.

By working on his skills, others naturally recognize his leadership ability by "tapping" him for leadership posts. For Billy, being in these positions was not just one more thing to do; it was an opportunity for him to further influence people, and since not everyone had the skills he had, it was natural that others saw the leader within him.

About the fourth year of that journey in teaching, my father, who's a school *superintendent*, a History major, began to talk to me about progressing on into administration. I did not have to have a lot of coaxing because I was developing those skills and I had a really strong mentor in Bob Conway (pseudonym) at the time who was a principal, who promoted me in a lot of the facets around the school that would get me into programs and start getting me interested in internships, those types of things.

For the first time, Billy mentions his father and relates that he is a school superintendent. For Billy, the mold is set for his leadership aspirations, for he has a specific position in mind as a goal. Admittedly, he did not need coaxing, for he had developed those “skills.” He also had a mentor who assisted in positioning him for programs and opportunities.

Now ironically, my internship as administrator was a bad experience. It was the *five B's*: busses, and books, beans and not-so-nice mothers. And I realized very quickly that the people who were leading that paradigm were managers. They were not communicative leaders who understood how to *mold and influence* people.

A bad experience in an internship is ironic for Billy. Everything else he is involved with is great, so why would the internship experience not be as well? He lists only four of the “five B’s,” leaving off “butts.” Butts refer to the responsibility for discipline that administrators usually assume in their first position. Billy noted that he never had any discipline problems as a teacher, which is perhaps why he leaves it off when recalling the five B’s.

Those people working in the paradigm of the Five B’s were managers in Billy’s eyes, and subsequently did not know how to influence people. Interestingly, he assumes those administrators are in that position because of their managing paradigm rather than the necessity of those responsibilities in operating a school.

So, towards the end of my tenure, I began to look at assistant principal posts. And I looked for leaders who were very similar to myself, but initially I didn’t get those jobs. I probably applied for a year in my sixth year of teaching and finally ended up in ----- Middle School.

He searches for a year for assistant principal positions with principals who were “very similar to myself” but doesn’t relate in which way. He finally gets a position after six years as a classroom teacher.

The principal I worked with was a classic manager, very good with data and operations, but what I credit her for in influencing my career *is she saw talent in me very quickly* and I could have entered as an AP as the bus and discipline guy; she promoted me over a sitting AP to the Assistant Principal of Instruction. So as a twenty-seven year-old, I had an opportunity to move right into the first seat as the AP, and I capitalized on that.

Billy recognizes his first principal’s primary skill as being her ability to recognize his talent. Thanks to her keen eye for talent, he was able to leapfrog a sitting assistant principal and become the assistant principal for instruction.

She immediately saw that as she characterized it, I had a *silver tongue*. And at that time, my vocabulary has always been strong, and I could communicate a message. I certainly could write about it and I certainly could read things and digest them. What I was missing at that time was implementation and sort of deploying a lot of these skills – follow-up, monitoring. But *she saw that too* and she allowed me for the next three years, from twenty-seven to thirty, to really be the mouthpiece for that school, to be the PR person, to be the one that went out into the community with partnerships, and to be the one who led staff development.

Billy’s use of silver tongue is interesting. The connotations for it are rather ambiguous, for it can refer to cunning and sophisticated, or it can mean deceptive. For three years, Billy is able to use his silver tongue to be the spokesperson—all because his principal realized the skills he had. He begins the first of several name drops in his narrative.

Also, I was being mentored at that time by Dr. James ----- who was Superintendent of -----, and James began to tap me for district projects and saw potential, and recommended that I get involved in LPAP at the time and other things through the PEP programs. As I began to do those things, those *folks recognized my talents* and I won an award and other things began to happen for me.

Once again, he recognizes the strength of these individuals as their ability to recognize his talents. At the age of thirty, Billy applies to and begins a doctoral program at the university. For the first time, he evaluates what he cannot do well: communicate when the news is not good. Here is slippage in his story, for he leaves out of his story a time when things did not go well.

When I was thirty, I applied for the doctoral program at the university. *The circles that I was moving in* all demanded strong writing skills, strong reading skills and strong communication skills. *What I had still not truly mastered was how to communicate when things went poorly, how to communicate when things were not up to par and snuff.* I was very good at leading what I call the front-runners at that time in my career – the people that were high achievers and could do the work.

Billy acknowledges a select, homogeneous group with which he associates and further advances his self importance. This group has similar skills to his, but more importantly, they have the ability to recognize his talents.

So, one of the *connections* I made in the doctoral cohort was through Mary -----, who was a sitting principal in ----- County. Mary was *a rising star* in the principal field and was about to be promoted to the district office. She introduced me to Jimmy ----- who was the former superintendent of ----- . He and I hit it off and I got my first principal post at ----- Middle in ----- County. ----- Middle was where I cut my teeth for three years, ok?



He uses connections to mean a benefit rather than a joining. Billy's next professional opportunity comes due to associating with a rising star and being among the big boys. He uses Mary to get to another individual, Jimmy, who has the ability to get him his next position. He refers to the three years he spent there as where he "cut" his teeth, suggesting a strong learning opportunity.

I had a very difficult faculty; more than 50% of them were thirty years more experienced. It was a very strong value-added community that was already high-performing. So the communication challenge was convincing them that 90% was not good enough and you had to move them into higher realms of achievement for kids. So while at -----, I began to learn how to reorganize, I began to learn *how to tap relationships that benefited me through communication.*

Billy obviously uses relationships much differently than Donna. She utilizes relationships for enriching the lives and experiences of individuals while Billy "taps" them to benefit his career. The difficulty was not in the faculty members themselves, but in persuading them, and he utilizes relationships within the school in order to benefit him directly. He gives a specific example.

One of the people I dealt with at Parker Middle that taught me a lot was the bookkeeper and SIMS operator that had been there twenty years. She had basically run the operations for the school. She didn't really want that post, but the previous principals had sort of delegated that to her.

And I utilized her knowledge and wisdom to learn a lot about student registrations, scheduling, operations, things that I was weak in, and we met weekly. And what I would tell you about that relationship is that there's a lot of principals who when they get their first post who crash and burn because of the power complex.

They believe that now that they're head of the school, they don't have to learn or *communicate* anymore, that from here on out they're just professing and espousing their doctrine. It's a huge mistake.

He credits his relationship with the bookkeeper as key to navigating the “power complex” in his first principalship, and uses her to advance his stature. Those who run afoul of the “power complex” do so, for Billy, when they get into their beliefs and doctrines. Instead, leaders should use the complex to advance through the organization. For the first time, he steps outside of the narrative and reflects on situations in general when leaders do not tap these relationships. He also compares that to what English teachers do naturally as part of their nature.

English teachers, because of their very nature to look at minor characters, lead characters, they’re very natured to consider the audiences they’re *communicating* with in writing and speaking, that you may be *communicating* to the very highly educated, and you may be *communicating* to the non-educated who needs a simple message.

Billy connects a specific skill related to the teaching of English into the leadership paradigm. He suggests that being able to determine who the audience is becomes crucial to communicating effectively as a leader. He follows with what he specifically organized at his school to foster communication and leadership.

Well, I set up in ----- Middle what I called learning structures. On Mondays, I had my Admin Team. On Tuesdays I met with counselors because I wanted to take leadership right out to student support right away. On Wednesdays I met with the faculty teams. On Thursdays I met with parent groups and Fridays I met with the students. So each week had a real consensus of what the multiple stake-holders felt about ----- Middle. At the time, I didn’t really understand the value of that but I knew that *I was learning a lot about how the different groups needed my leadership.*

His communication skills and knowledge of audiences turned into a learning experience as he discovered what his constituents needed from him as a leader. He says

that they needed him, which is probably a rationalization for the narcissistic leader who utilizes (exploits) relationships so fluidly. He moves back into his narrative and makes the connection between communication and the research he was doing in relation to his doctoral studies at the time.

Right around my thirty-third year and my third year at Parker, I was doing my doctoral internship and finishing up my doctorate with Jimmy with high school research. What had fascinated me was the disconnect. I had been a high school teacher and a middle school principal and I was noticing that the very practices we were doing in middle school were not translating over to the high school, and they should be.

So my research focused on four basic questions for my dissertation about why principals at high performing EOC schools were *successful*. What were the four main roles *that made them successful*? Well ironically, a lot of them have to do with communication.

He says communication is a key feature in his ability to lead. The principals were successful, just as he is, and he shares what he learned in his studies concerning communication and leadership.

The principals that were knocking it out with high growth and the principals that were knocking it out with achievement were the chief learning leader in their school. They didn't give a damn about operations; they focused on instructional leadership. Assistant principals and others were for operations. And they committed to that. If you had a drug bust, they'd let the Assistant principal handle it whether he crashed and burned. That was a significant difference, because the AP had to learn that to be a principal.

Billy does not comment on the fact that he never had (or took) the opportunity to serve as an assistant principal responsible for operations since that was not in his

leadership paradigm. Principals did not give a “damn,” and neither does he. He admits that it is crucial learning for the assistant principal, but he never had to learn it.

The other thing that they played a big role in was designer of those structures. Well I’d already played with that at ----- Middle. So I began to think about, “Ok, I’ve got these structures but how do I focus them towards attaining my goals and measures?” So I began to take a lot of training in strategic planning. That was a real focus for me. I went to things like the *Baldrige National Training Program* to get myself a *Senior Examination status*, where I could go into *any* organization and say, “These are your gaps; these are your problems.” I began to read a lot on *Six Sigma* and just how systems work.

Having the core structures in place, he seeks to move beyond structures and into processes by adding to his skill sets. He name drops programs to add to his credentials and accolades, making an association between nationally recognized programs and process and him. Kets de vries (1984) refers to namedropping as an example of the narcissistic leader “showing the others how truly great he is” (p. 158). Billy is consistently working on what is next in his quest for unbridled growth in his skill set.

The third thing they did was they liaised with the outside world. This is often a problem for principals. They don’t want to let parents in, or whatever. BIG mistake. Some of your most active parents can be your biggest advocates if you communicate appropriately. And sometimes as I would tell you in state government being owned by three different bosses, you have to make those relationships work because you need those players down the road. And as Bobby Williams (pseudonym) at ----- [school district] once said, you need to decide which issues are worth planting your flag on and not every issue is.

Billy returns to his belief that communication is a key ingredient in organizational success. He then returns to his narrative.

So, I began to learn those skills. Well, Jimmy tapped me to open the first high school in ----- County in forty years. To do that takes a *massive communication effort* and a *massive learning effort*.

Billy sets the stage in this sub-story by prefacing it with the incredible amount of effort it was going to require and how he was just the one with the perfect skills to get it done.

Now, there were a lot of people whom I met with initially including senior leadership, so-called experts above me, who said, “Just listen to us and it will work out.” *Well I didn’t take that route.*

He chooses to go his own way in learning how to open a new high school, although others close to him encouraged him to “just listen” to them.

I went out and talked to people across the country that had opened high schools and *using my English skills*, began to look for things and say, “What were the negative things? What were the positive things? And how can I replicate the positive things and knock down the negative things with practices and process?” This was also dovetailing with my Baldrige work and my Six Sigma so I had a lot of background on how to set that up.

Billy, after just three years as a middle school principal, is chosen to open a new high school in the district. He immediately notes that it is a “massive communication effort,” but he can do it because he has the skills, and this is an opportunity that is ideal for someone such as him. Narcissistic leaders consistently look to enact environments rather than react to them as Kets de vries & Miller (1984) remind us, and constantly look to be achieving additional goals, those beyond the capabilities of the average leader.

Now, communications both written and spoken during that start-up year are huge. Students deserve a first-class experience with a founding school just like an existing school. So I had to get out and market that to the community; I had to publish an e-letter weekly, I had to do these things that would really promote the school even before we had materials and supplies.

I had to think about effective ways to solve that like Wiki's and websites to really get the word out, ok? *I did that probably too well* and within my first four months at ----- High School, I saw a posting in ----- [school system] that said, "We're looking for a Chief Quality Officer." I read the description and it seemed to fit my talents for a school system, in other words building systems across the school system.

After four months, Billy is off to a new adventure. Interestingly, he credits his opportunity to having communicated too well and being a victim of his own success. His talents have become a burden to him as well. He tells about some criticism that came his way because of it.

Now at the time that I accepted the post, there were a lot of people who said, "Well, you built this school from scratch, you spent over twelve months doing it, and you're only spending four months there. *Did you learn enough?* Do you have the experience to go on and lead systems?"

For the first time, Billy share specific feedback from others in relation to his decisions.

Well, I looked at it like I had been a middle school principal for three years, a high school principal for one, because I felt like the start-up year was a lot about learning how to build systems.

While others thought four years as a principal was not enough experience for him to learn about leading a school system, Billy thought one year opening a new high school was excellent preparation for leading a system. For Billy, his unique opportunity of

opening a high school—and the process he used makes him exceptionally ready to lead a school system. He then rationalizes his decision to accept the position.

You get *opportunities* in your life that is unbelievable and this was an unbelievable *opportunity*. When I went to the first principalship because of my age, I made \$65,000 and I had a cell phone. The ----- *opportunity* was the first *opportunity* I had to make *six figures*; it was the first *opportunity* I had to have an automobile, it was the first *opportunity* I had to have National Staff Development money that I could go and learn and become stronger as a leader.

Billy's repeated use of the word opportunity appeared to have a stimulant effect as he spoke. He leaned forward even more and his spoke with more volume. Here was his real motivation for leaving after one year as a high school principal. It was about money, a car, and a national stage.

And I had a superintendent who led me to believe that I'd be the next superintendent. So I don't know a lot of people that would have turned that opportunity down.

Here's an opportunity for Billy to become the next superintendent, another chance to be closer to center stage where he believes that he belongs; however, he does not relate how he was lead to believe he would be the next superintendent. He could possibly have led himself to believe it. He rationalizes that anyone would have taken the opportunity, especially with the salary and perks being offered. He begins to tell of his first year and a half in this new position with the ----- School System.

I took the opportunity. My superintendent immediately delivered on his promise and in the first year *hooked me up* with the American Productivity and Quality Council. I was part of a *national study* for staff development. Have the best organizations – *not just education*, but US Army, IBM, GE, new staff development.

The superintendent fortunately promised and delivered. Billy expected him to uphold his end of the bargain since it was a crucial rung in his career-climbing endeavor. He uses “hooked me up” as code for being in an elite circle now with all the big players. He was able to participate in learning opportunities on the national stage—again where he believes he belongs, and this time, it has overleapt its bounds to the corporate world. He speaks on how that learning relates back to communicating as a leader.

So I began to learn that best practice and best-in-class did not just mean education. It meant going out to world-class leaders, learning from their *communication techniques*, and then – *here’s a biggie for ya* – how do you read about that, write about it and speak it from an English mindset to transfer that back into education?

For the first time in his story, he acknowledges me as the listener so as to impress me with what he learned. He moved on to recall how successful the organization was due to him

Well *I became quite good at it* and in about a year, ----- School System in a lot of its measures had gone from top thirty to top fifteen under my leadership. SATs went into the top ten. I was also serving as Executive Director of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning, so we were doing iPod pilots, we were doing a lot of innovative things. We also were the first district nationwide in the Southeast to receive district accreditation, not school accreditation but district. Then we got a site visit from the Baldrige Association. We’re the only education institution in the country to get a site visit. *A lot of that was during my tenure.*

Billy tallies his accomplishments scorecard at this point, yet his story illustrates some slippage as he lists several accomplishments under his leadership, but he summarizes the section in noting that “some” were accomplished during his tenure. Billy then experiences his first professional rupture after eighteen months in his latest position.



So when I got to my eighteenth month at -----, the superintendent called me in and he said, “Billy, I’ve got some good news and bad news.” And I said, “Ok.” He said, “I just signed a new four-year contract.” He had told me he was going to sign a two. So, it basically meant *that if I had aspirations* of rising – Chief Quality Officers are on par with Assistant Superintendent. In -----, you have a Chief Quality, Chief Operations, Chief Academic. *So it meant four years away*, ok?

Four years is too long for Billy to wait. After all, look at what he had accomplished in the previous four years. At this point of the narrative, Billy switches to a more dramatic dialogue as he re-enacts his conversation with the superintendent. He utilizes more ego language (I) in a shorter length of time than he had previously. Was there any question about aspirations of rising? Four years away probably would seem like an eternity for Billy.

Now, I could have done that and I had that option and he gave me that option with a *pay raise* because one of the things that I had done was lead the district in a *\$3.1 million Small Learning Communities Grant, one of only thirty-six in the country*. So, basically he and I were going to negotiate that grant because there was a salary for part of the director’s salary. But he said, “I’ve got something else that I think might interest you.” He says, “I serve on the Governor’s -----Commission, and they had a lot of problems with the state online high school, and the Governor and the Department of Public Instruction would like for you to come talk with them.”

Billy’s interruption in his career ladder climb is assuaged by a new opportunity at the state level as he lists the accomplishments that illustrate his elitism. Waiting four years will not be necessary now that a new opportunity is available immediately, especially one that involves even more money. He recalled how that conversation went with state leaders.

*I went for a conversation. That conversation was supposed to be an hour. By the end of the day, it was five hours and I had met with every sectional chief at the Department of Public Instruction and two members of the State Board. I was the lead at ----- for ----- [school system], so I knew a lot of their gaps and a lot of their problems statewide.*

He reminds me that his extensive knowledge base gave him the advantage in his conversation that was supposed to be for one hour. Because of his knowledge, it was able to be a five hour conversation in which he convinced them (or overwhelmed) that he was the one for the position.

*I was on a lot of those panels because the superintendent insisted, like my former mentor, in serving on those committees statewide, being involved on them and in my eighteen months although brief – I like to always use the expression, “I do more in eighteen months than most people do in three years.” So, while it seems like a short time, I was able to work on a lot of those committees and understand the dilemmas of Online, but there had to be a lot of research to that too.*

Billy’s use of ego language is elevated once again as he recalls the conversation with the officials, and he acknowledges his pattern of not being in any one position very long. He rationalizes his short tenure by claiming the benefits of efficiency. Interestingly he acknowledges that it was a short time by saying it “seemed” to be. Perhaps it seemed for others to be a short tenure, but not for someone who is perpetually moving on. Billy sells himself as the ultimate entrepreneur with a dramatic flair consistent with the description of the narcissistic leader as given by Kets de vries (1984).

He continues by telling how he prepared for the meeting and how he sold himself through the utilization of his communication skills.

So, when you go to meet with the governor and you're told that's going to happen in about ten days, what did *I* do? *I* read all of the Online Learning Commission Study Report. *I* went and read NACOL's stuff nationally on online learning. *I* went and read Schreib's stuff on online learning. Looked for best practice. Just like *I*'ve done in every job, in ten days, looked for things that would make that successful and look for things that were hindering it.

Billy steps on stage once again to show that he is the best person with the best skills with a whole plan finished. He refers to his readings as "stuff," suggesting that the information was less important than what he was going to do with it.

And then, *I* went into that hour with a ninety-day plan for Online that *I* wrote. It was three pages, concise, extremely succinct because it had to be *executive* summary but also outlay what *I* would do in ninety days if hired. Keep it in mind; *I* didn't have a job interview at that time.

He continues his elevated use of ego language as he recalls his performance. He has a plan going in, and yes it's all premised on reading for information and reading his audience, but it's also show time, for now is when his uncommon talent meets with opportunity once again. He summarizes how he conducted himself at the meeting.

I measured my comments to be both *poignant* but also reflective and listening to them, and making them feel I think at that time that there was a real *reciprocity* in the conversation between my listening to understand where their dilemmas were and then applying what I had learned to that. When I finished that interview there was a lot of negotiation between the superintendent and ----- . He basically couldn't match -----'s offer which was outstanding, so I took the opportunity.

Billy's word choice of poignant suggests the emotional appeal he felt his words had on his audience. Kets de vries (1984) again reminds us that the narcissistic leader works diligently in the arena of impression management. Although he does not clarify what he

means by reciprocity, it would be easy to imply that he is using it to mean that he can correct their issues which he pointed out in exchange for paying someone with his skills a handsome salary. Once again, Billy is off to a new position. He reflects on the meeting once again and recalls that it reminded him of a time when he was in high school.

It reminded me of a time I can clearly remember doing a presentation that I was asked to do in ----- . I went to high school in ----- and while at -----, it's *only one week* when you're there, and on that Monday we broke out into focus groups and the presentation was about dress code for ----- students. It had started to become an issue. It was late 80s and they were talking about uniforms and all these different things.

Billy's story has the commonality of the concept of time as does his life story. His push to climb the career ladder makes time a competitor. All of his accomplishments are against the backdrop of the time as a linear entity rather than a process of learning cycles.

I had spoken in an affirmative/negative debate-type situation in a sort of mock scenario on Monday and what they wanted me to do was come back Friday, it's sort of a model UN and present on a topic. So they were grooming you for these scenarios so that at the end of the week, you could come in and present. And lots of people took that opportunity as a chance just to speak. They thought, "Well, I'll just go up for five minutes and I'll speak."

Little did they know who Billy was he took the opportunity to speak. Billy, for first time during his life story, sits back in his chair. In an almost dream-like state, he begins to recall the event in startling detail.

My topic, I remember it as *clear as day*, was looking at, at that time legalizing drugs, because remember in the late 80s, there was a lot of crack and different things on the street and people were starting to have that sort of concept. At that time, you didn't have multimedia or any kind of computers, ok, this was '86. So I did a four-corners

experience for the model UN where I had a chart paper on each of the corners of the room and I had the four key issues with legalizing drugs. And I had *numbered off the entire audience*, which at that time was 50 kids but we were sitting in the ----- legislature and there were a lot of “adults” and people that probably wanted me to speak from the floor or maybe the podium or whatever, and without really asking people, I basically had an interactive presentation where they listed their things, their issues, walked around like almost in a gallery walk and then I would follow up and organize the key things and sort of say, “Ok, so if we’ve got to write a plan from this, our action steps are *gonna* be that we’re *gonna* leave this four-corners exercise, I’m going to capture what was presented on the things, we’re *gonna* rate these as best and we’re *gonna* go after two or three things that we can do well from each one.”

He acknowledges that he doesn’t speak from the podium as others would have; rather he gets them involved in an “interactive” presentation. The presentation is not on drugs. The presentation is on Billy and his impression management skills. He uses “gonna” to describe his taking charge of the crowd and moving them around his chess board.

I did that as a senior in high school and after I left that, I had so many – Senator ----- ---- at the time was there – and *I had so many pats on the back*. What I would call it is a “*rock star epiphany*,” like I’ll never be a rock star, but the feeling of that was so significant in its *ability to move people* and the debriefing that afternoon that I got of people telling me that it had made an impact on the way they thought about that issue. The senators sort of slapped me on the back and sort of saying, “*You’re going to be with us one day*,” and all that. *It was crystal clear* that that was *what I was talented at*. Now I didn’t know where it would lead, but that was some moment.

Billy remembers well the euphoria of moving people—physically in this instance, but also emotionally. He gets the affirmation of his exceptional skill through the literal pat on the back from a United States senator. In some respects, he is constantly striving to be a rock star.

Billy’s use of language largely suggests narcissistic as his primary leadership style; however, the true confirmation would be in the examination of those followers who have

been left in his wake. In the meantime, he will continue seeking out opportunities through his natural-born talent and silver tongue.

CHAPTER VI  
STUART POSTON

The art of communication is the language of leadership

- James Humes

**Introduction**

Stuart Poston (pseudonym) is a newly-named president of small college in a rural, southeastern state. Although he spent many years working and living in Georgia, he was raised in the Ohio valley. Unlike the others, he comes from a distinctly academic background and self-consciously places himself in the sixties through the use of military language throughout his story, although he never served in the armed forces. His leadership opportunity began with an offer to help someone.

Stuart is now the president of a small liberal arts college with an environmentalism bent in a rural southeastern state. During the summer, the college hosts family-based arts and music festivals. For the past several years, my family has visited often and become acquainted with several of the faculty and staff members. This past summer, one of the music professors mentioned in conversation that a new college president had been selected and would be assuming the leadership later in the fall. He mentioned in passing that the new president was a former English professor.

After a brief phone conversation, Stuart Poston invites me to visit him at his office. He tries to explain how to get to his office, but it is a little difficult. Stuart is new on the

job. He is *so new* in fact, that all of his personal belongings are “still boxed up, lining the wall of his carport,” as if he felt compelled to explain the sparse office I would discover. I know this Stuart because although we have never formally met until now, we had been communicating briefly via email in setting up our meeting. He’s looking forward to meeting with me.

Finding his office was actually easy for me since I was so familiar with the campus, so when he began to describe the physical characteristics of the building that housed his office, I told him that I knew exactly where it was. It was a small cottage with a western exposure to the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Stuart’s background is in academics, and while he tells a story that includes all the customary elements, he often moves into evaluative summaries as he reflects on his experiences. It is in these reflections that he shares some of his practices and beliefs and provides some insight into his leadership style. Stuart is able to lead through the contributions of others. This fostering of the collaboration of those within the organization permits him to facilitate involvement at all levels. Billy Jones, on the other hand, employs a leadership style that obfuscates the contributions of others.

### **Leadership Style**

David Conley and Paul Goldman (1994) define facilitative leadership as “the behaviors that enhance the collective ability of a school to adapt, solve problems, and improve performance,” and the emphasis is on collective. The organization is lead collectively through the contributions of all its members with the leader cultivating the



offerings of the individuals. Throughout his narrative and reflections, Stuart made references to several of his beliefs and practices that illustrate his facilitative nature.

There are several key strategies utilized by facilitative leaders (Conley & Goldman)

- Building teams
- Providing feedback
- Coordination
- Creating communication networks
- Modeling the school's vision

### **The Interview**

Stuart begins by telling me that he grew up in a small town in Ohio. He went off to college *in the late sixties* to the premier *liberal arts college* of the day – Amherst College.

After earning his degree he found himself at a crossroad:

I thought about going to business school, but I didn't really have a direction. I thought about teaching English in high school. I had been at a liberal arts school, so I didn't have an education degree, so the only opportunity there would have been private high schools. I really didn't want to do that right away.

Without mentioning the Vietnam War going on, Stuart says that he thought about entering an MBA program. He actually was accepted into the program in the early seventies, but abruptly decided not to do that:

I had this moment of sort of an *epiphany* where I decided that wasn't for me and wanted to go back into where there were no jobs at all – English. So, I decided on a PH.D program in English, but it was too late to start the year. So, I did all kinds of other stuff. I drove an ambulance, worked for a newspaper, worked in a Ford factory making Lincoln Continentals. I was just doing.

Not having found his calling, he employs literary language with “epiphany.” James Joyce has secularized the idiom in referring to dramatic moments with an almost magical air.

He began his graduate program at Kent State shortly after shootings, which he recalls without commentary

Then I started in the fall of '70 shortly after the shootings at Kent State. You may or may not remember that; there were four students killed and nine injured at Kent State on May 4<sup>th</sup> 1970. Well shortly after that in the fall I started there as a graduate student and was for five years went through a Masters and a PHD program and I worked a dual fellowship.

I was both a Resident's Hall Advisor and I was a Teaching Fellow in English Department. I taught my courses in the dormitory, which is one of the first what they call residential colleges in town trying to bring together living and learning environments. That really helped to form the kind of teacher I wanted to be with a heavy *emphasis on student affairs and interest in the full life of the student*.

He mentions that this experience of teaching in the dormitory shaped the type of teacher he wanted to be with the heavy emphasis on the “full life” of the student, a very humanities-based concept of the well rounded student whose academic and non-academic encounters contribute to the development of the whole person.

He matriculated there for five years through a Master's program and a PHD program. As a graduate with a PH.D. in 1975, he went to Texas and work in the university system for five years.

[I] ultimately went forward in teaching English and I was really on both sides of the aisle, if you will. I was teaching English and Literature, but I was also moving into technical scientific communication.

Interestingly, he refers to a dichotomy between English Literature and technical scientific communication, revealing his interpretation of humanities as distinct from “scientific” and “technical” forms.

He then narrates back to the present concerning a trip from which he just returned.

In fact, my publisher and I just got back from visiting in Columbus. He’s published four or five of my books in technical and professional writing. I was just there this weekend handing over a seventh edition of one of my books to a co-author because I just can’t keep up with this field now.

He moves back to his narrative and adds “But my excitement was staying both in teaching literature and writing and moving into some engineering writing.” He has found excitement in working on both sides of this “aisle.”

Stuart then tells of moving into the university system in Georgia, where he spent some twenty-four years teaching and ultimately becoming the chief academic officer.

I then moved to Atlanta and did twenty-four years at a school there called ----- State University becoming a department head, a professor in the department and ultimately a chief academic officer. There again, teaching both in the humanities side. I was head of a department called *Humanities and Technical Communication*, which really emphasizes this dichotomy and in also developing graduate, undergraduate and graduate programs, masters programs and some technical scientific writing.

He retired from the Georgia University system and took a position as provost and acting president at a small liberal arts college in New Jersey.

I decided that what I truly wanted to shift to after my first retirement was a much more *liberal arts orientation*. And during --- [college] I was doing that. I was a provost and acting president for one year and then provost another year, and then came here as the president.

Having come full circle career wise, Stuart is returning to the whole student concept in liberal arts. At this point in his narrative, Stuart shifts again back to the present and speaks of his new, present position as president:

I wasn't aiming to be a president of a college until fairly late in my life, but I certainly realized that the skills I had developed in communications certainly, and the instincts that I had, I felt, were just fine for leadership in academics.

He directly connects, or equates communication to leadership as well as his instincts, although he does not describe what those instincts were.

[I] had no, of course, formal training in leadership. Didn't have the MBA, as I said I skipped the MBA, decided not to do the MBA early in my life. Other than a few seminars here and there, took one last July at Harvard at the Institute for New Presidents, but other than that, my interest in academic leadership has been from the *communications* side.

Interestingly, he suggests that leadership can come about only through "formal training," yet he reconnects with communications and leadership. He then shared his observations along the way and related how he became involved in leadership:

It's been recognition off and on throughout my career that it [leadership] has been done pretty poorly; I didn't see enough *true* leadership and *communication* going on throughout a number of academic enterprises.

Stuart here couples leadership and communication together suggesting that they are synonymous, or at the least, correlates. The suggestion is that true leadership is communication. For him, a dearth of leadership was wherever there was a lack of

communication. This phenomenon is precisely what gives him his first experience in leadership, and he immediately related that first experience in military language:

I just took on leadership there *as a battlefield commission*. The academic leadership was in trouble. Without going into details, I'll just say there was a need of different leadership and I offered myself as someone who had been there forever to help and she accepted, and that helped bring me into the mainstream. I had not been on a *trajectory* to be a chief academic officer, let alone a president.

His recognition of both poor leadership and his position as a department head with a front-row view thrusts him into this “battlefield commission,” language that is perhaps a part of his discourse due to the Viet Nam conflict. He later used “trajectory” (missile or rocket direction) in reference to his path as well.

His offering to help brings him into the “mainstream” of leadership, suggesting that prior to that he viewed himself as unconventional or secondary. He moves into a reflection on that experience.

But it was my kind of throwing myself into a situation and saying “*I think I can help,*” and (---) acceptance of that, that allowed me to move into a position of Chief Academic Officer and to apply for others and ultimately became president. So I certainly have used my humanities, I think it's safe to say, in a pretty *robust* way in my career.

Again, he makes a connection to his humanities bearings, suggesting that they served a utilitarian purpose in moving into formal leadership positions. His use of robust suggests his belief of the value of his humanities background. As he continues to reflect he then tells of his experience and position prior to his volunteering to help.

I'd been a department head for twelve years, a low-level supervisor. I don't mean that in a *pejorative way*. I loved it. Department heads are probably the most important folks on campuses. That's where you're dealing with students and the faculty and the staff. If it doesn't get done there, it's not going to get done anywhere. But I thought, "That's probably going to be it for me." Retire as a tenure professor and as a department head.

Stuart refers to his earlier experience as a department head as being a "low-level supervisor" and immediately apologizes for it, even though he believes that the work done there is vitally important. Perhaps his ideation of low-level supervisors being a pejorative statement speaks to the stereotype of leadership being hierarchical, or perhaps it further illustrates for him a dichotomy of formal leadership and informal, typical leadership and atypical.

He mentions that today, as a leader, he looks for people who are "willing to come forward" much like he did. He then returns his story back to when he was in high school and reflects on the idea of leadership

*It's funny, I remember I had a strong desire to be in, I think early on, to be in leadership in academic circles, but I just didn't have that trajectory. I didn't have the degree in it. I didn't, gosh I think I probably wanted to be a "leader" in academics back when I was a Student Council President in high school, back when I just liked helping to run things, but I didn't, then it faded and I didn't see my opportunities until I had a couple of epiphanies.*

Stuart recognizes the irony between his desire at an early age to be in leadership and the absence of what he considered to be the conventional route. Again, Stuart employs repetition in using the term trajectory in referring to a route to leadership, and relates that as a high school student he wanted to be a leader in academics but never did. He does

indicate an inclination to be a participant in leadership which he later in the narrative extols as a virtue for those in humanities. However, his “epiphanies” lead him into leadership opportunities

[Some] of them were good epiphanies and some of them weren’t so hot. Sometimes it came about because I just saw people in disasters, close to disastrous situations where I thought, “Why don’t they get this,” and now as it ends up it’s a much harder job than I ever thought.

His story moves back to a reflection on the present and the difficulties of communicating as the leader:

And keeping the *communication* channels up in a job like this . . . it’s difficult because you’re pulled in lots of directions and you could spend all day *communicating*, but you have to target some things. That was another *epiphany* I had when I realized I needed to focus.

His use of the word communication in reference to a channel suggests the open movement of meaning between sender and receiver. He can be involved in sending and receiving information, which is important, but objectives have to be reached as well. He understands the role of communication as an important part of reaching organizational goals, an important strategy for the facilitative leader (Conley & Goldman, 1994). Again, Poston utilizes repetition in using revelatory language in naming his experience.

I said, “I need to focus on what communication channels I think are most important.” So, I came here and decided monthly reports to campus would be important. No big deal, right? I put out a monthly report; I’m a writer, it’s easy for me to do. I’ve been amazed by how people responded. “Oh we *love*, we never heard about the campus before. . . .” and I had a *great predecessor on my hands*. He [previous president] communicated in his own ways I’m sure well, but the people had not had that before,

and I realized that something that was pretty easy for me to do – keeping some notes throughout the year, throughout the month, putting something out, made a huge difference in developing common bonds and camaraderie among the group here.

Stuart receives feedback on his efforts to implement communication networks.

Goldman and Conley (1994) recognize the ability to creatively managing tensions within the organization as a hallmark of facilitative leadership, and Stuart able to navigate succeeding a popular, long-term president. In referring to his predecessor, he describes him as being “on his hands.” Interestingly, one would perhaps use the phrase “on my hands” to indicate burdensome or perhaps something needing to be deal with. Perhaps having this great predecessor is more of a positive for others in the organization than it is for Stuart, but he relies on what he does well to ameliorate the transition.

Poston then turns his narrative toward his daily schedule and what he tries to do in his new position as president as part of communication:

Going out on campus every day, which I try to do, making sure that I fit it in. I don't do it every day but I sure consider it a failure if I don't. A trip to an office, a trip to see the students – *it sounds calculated and in a way it is because I make sure I go out the door and do it, but people love it.*

Although it sounds calculated, Stuart makes sure that he interacts with the people in the organization. People respond to him being out of his office perhaps out of contrast from his predecessor. Yet, he makes it a part of his routine and it communicates a decentralization of the organization for those not accustomed to the president being out among the faculty, staff, and students.



*And I love it, because I'm a people guy, and that's not forced to me. That's where you find out about the place, making sure that you visit the leadership groups and the committee meetings, things that you can do. Make sure that I go down on the farm – I work the farm sometimes, right? I'll visit the work crews. So what I'm saying is I'm still working on this to find the right model.*

Stuart practices the symbolic nature of leadership by visiting the various parts of the campus, including the farm which is a vital component of the college. His grass roots nature resonates with his desire to involve all in the organization.

*You have to, in a calculated way, develop a communication strategy that works for whatever environment you're in, and I've done it differently when I was Chief Academic Officer at two different institutions and President of this one. I've sure thought it through what was best. And all the time and at each of those institutions, I've had correctives or people saying, or suggestions that have come to me either formally or informally, well maybe you ought to be doing more of this *and I just try to listen. And a lot of it's that, just listen.**

He emphasizes a critical part of communication in listening. In contrast, Billy Jones ignores feedback from some members of his organization and rationalizes the next decision.

His discussion of what he does and believes gives us even further insight into his leadership style and behavior. He considers getting out of his office and onto the campus as a key ingredient for communication. Creating communication networks, an attribute of facilitative leadership, is mission critical for Stuart. He lists specifically visiting leadership groups, committee meetings, and work crews. Interestingly, he added that his communication model was different in each of his previous leadership positions.

While others have made “suggestions” or “correctives” for doing more of certain things, he states that he just “listens.”

Stuart steps out of his story once again, and while he had been talking about communication, he turns to the subject of personnel.

I guess I’m moving into slightly a different subject but it supports this subject of communication – hiring and delegating well. I still think I hire better than I do almost anything else. I’ve been pretty good at that. And then, making sure to delegate and give people responsibility for their areas – *authority and responsibility* – again a very simple business principle and management principle, but one that is often not done well in colleges and universities.

He gives us unfettered access to his beliefs and values in relation to leadership. Stuart distributes authority to others and posits responsibility to others in the organization. He does so upon recognition that it typically has not been done well at other colleges and universities.

Bolman and Deal (1991) identifies four frames for thinking about leadership: Rational; human resource; symbolic; and political. In referencing facilitative leadership, they note that while some leaders attend to one or perhaps two of these frames, whereas facilitative leaders attend to all four. Here, Stuart moves freely in the frame of human resources when talking about communication and the importance of communications as well as symbolic by involving himself in various capacities throughout the campus.

A lot here – and it’s not a criticism, it’s an observation – *a lot here has floated to the top* over the years because there hasn’t been adequate structure *below*, if you will. I hire key people *giving people power* to do things and I’m all about that. That comes out of my own background as being a head of an English department at a college. It wasn’t called English Department but that’s what it was.

His “observation” of a lack of structure below over the years before he arrived on campus gives me some insight as well on his leadership, suggesting a more autocratic style of his predecessor. Stuart distributes power to others throughout the organization, and clearly sees communication as a catalyst for leading the college. Perhaps the lack of structure “below” will be remedied with the distribution of authority and responsibility. Communication is fundamental to how things are to be done on campus (how he is going to carry out the symbolic nature of leadership), and crucial to the human relations aspect of leadership. His reference to a lot “floating to the top” suggests a hierarchical structure in which responsibilities moved to the upper tiered administrators rather than being distributed throughout the organization, or perhaps suggests debris. It certainly speaks to the political frame as in who can exercise power. He without doubt believes in collaboration as indicated by his reference to authority and responsibility earlier in his story. He goes on reflecting on humanities and leadership.

When you’re leading a group of Humanities faculty and anybody, you’re going to be leading people almost invariably who want to be participants. *It just is their nature*, it’s how if you look, I’m . . .

I can’t quote it but I know I read it, but if you look at people who gravitate towards certain majors and characteristics of people in certain majors, you can bet people in English and Humanities, *they are articulate, they talk, and they want to be involved and expect to be asked.*

Stuart suggests that the desire to be involved drives his leadership style and behaviors.

He connects with these individuals with humanities backgrounds, a group in which he is also a member, and empowers them to be active participants.

So, when I led that department for twelve years, that was my model for making sure I involved people.

*If I wasn't inclined to involve people, they would have run me off on a rail. I'd have been gone. So that provided me a good springboard for moving into higher level positions where that same communication was expected. That's what I'm trying to say.*

Stuart directly connects his current job to his skills of facilitative leadership. He understands the collective wisdom of those throughout the organization, and he sets up open communication networks to facilitate information. Doing so not only provides for the open and free movement of information, but it also makes smooth the process of receiving and giving feedback (Goldman & Conley, 1994).

In his experience, English majors want to be leaders by their very nature. Moreover, they expect to be leaders. He directly understands that if he did not seek to involve them, he would have been “run off on a rail.” He counts that as good experience in communication as he moved on into higher levels of leadership.

He continues his reflection by making his connection with his work in the humanities and leadership.

I think that's the connection that I would say is *the most salient in humanities and leadership for my life*, is that notion that as a humanities person, you *both expect to be involved* in decision making, *hope to be involved* in decision-making and then if you

drink the Kool-Aid and it took, you're going to involve other people in decision-making and that's why I think I got hired here.

Stuart understands his experience as a leader with humanities as well as his skill in working with others with humanities-based experiences as the reason he was hired in his current position. Interestingly, he utilized the phrase "drink the Kool-aid," a sinister remark that historically suggested blind obedience without critical examination, as in Jonestown. The word choice indicates slippage from his intended meaning of understanding the importance of communicating and involving those from the humanities. He moves freely between being a humanities person and being a humanities-based leader in his language of expectation and hope.

He reflects on decision making as a by-product of the involvement of others, and the ability to make tough decisions, another element of facilitative leadership .citation

At the same time, making sure that you can make tough decisions. That's working hard on the touchy-feely side of it in the best sense of the phrase, which I do on *the collaborative side* and *consensus-building side*, but also understanding with building that trust so that when you make decisions, some tough ones, and I've had to make a couple here to sort of *set a new pattern in some ways*, that there will be decisions made and, oh by the way, we'll be *consistent in how we do it*. People are ready for that when you make it and they're better able to accept it.

Stuart has established working protocols as the leader of the college, and he understands the connection between collaboration and understanding the reasons behind decisions being made. His suggestion is that collaboration is a means to building trust. He acknowledges key principles of facilitative leadership in his referral to collaboration

and consensus building as well as his insisting on consistency in the decision making process (Conley & Goldman, 1994).

Stuart closes his life story by reflecting on leadership

We all need to be following, I guess we're all searching, *and it's a process*. Because I think over my career I wouldn't have had a clue – well, I said I wouldn't have had a clue I would have ended up as president of a college. I remember hoping for it and that, but so few people get this kind of job, especially the job at a really interesting school. That's what this is.

There is slippage in Stuart's narrative with his suggestion that leadership is a process versus a trajectory that requires a degree. As a narrator speaking of the beginning of his career, he was not on a trajectory. As a leader near the end of his career, he sees himself as a leader following a process.

And at the time that I got this job, I had, at the time I was offered this job, I had an offer the same week for another presidency, which is rare because they don't come by that often. But I interviewed for four or five and the same week I got an offer at a public liberal arts college in another state in the South, a very good school, which was exactly like what I had been in New Jersey, a public liberal arts school when I was an interim president

And my entire experience in teaching from 1970 until now has been in public institutions, so I looked at this one and I thought, "What's the job that looks best for the end of my career if you will, and *my bliss*, if you will," and this was the one. And it came back in a way full circle to my starting at a private liberal arts college as an undergraduate and then looping back to a private liberal arts college in my last job.

But the easiest job for me would have been the other. Easiest from the sense of all my background is public education. I understand it, I get it, and working with legislators and constituencies is so much different. Boy, it's *different here*.

He hints at the political frame of his current position is different from his previous experience working with legislators and constituencies. Politics of private education in that it is “different here.”

He sees his career as coming “full circle” with a beginning in a private liberal arts college as an undergraduate and now concluding his career as the president of yet another private liberal arts school. Throughout his career, he recognized the importance of communications, albeit most often when there was a lack of it.

Stuart has some realizations along the way in his career as an English professor. Even though he wasn't overtly looking to become a college president, he realized something along the way. He comments on his observations concerning the responsibilities of leadership when it comes to hiring and delegating by saying that it is “often not done well in colleges and universities,” which he considers one of his strengths as a leader.

He repeats the word epiphany or epiphanies throughout his narrative. These sudden realizations came at crucial points in his career, and he capitalized on them each time. Each instance becomes a confirmation for him of an idea that was present all along. He has now become anticipatory in his epiphanies and uses the language of Joseph Campbell at one point in following his bliss.

CHAPTER VII  
AUTOBIOGRAPHY

It is first . . . for a man to find out what kind of work he is to do in this universe  
- Thomas Carlyle

**The First Day**

The first day of school in 1969 was the first of many defining moments. Since there was no kindergarten, my first schooling experience took place in the small corner classroom on the first floor of North Amerson Elementary School. My mother accompanied me that morning, and I remember in vivid detail the outline of her head and shoulders along the wall as Mrs. Fike, my first grade teacher, told us how exciting and wonderful school was going to be.

At dismissal, my mother escorted me on the short route from the school to the lady who was my caretaker after school. Ms. Lou, the woman second most important to me after my mother, would be awaiting my arrival this day. After a short walk across a well-marked path, over a small footbridge, I would crest a hill and see the small, clean clapboard house known as Ms. Lou's. Only this time, I would be seeing it from a different direction, a different perspective.

Ms. Lou was my surrogate mother while my parents were working in the textile mills fifty-one weeks of each year. She constantly reminded us of how hard our parents worked and that we should strive to make them proud by working hard in school to learn



as much as we could so we could do better. As my mother and I made our way across the wooden bridge covering Coley's creek, I stumbled and landed hard on my left knee. The asphalt path chewed at the skin just below my kneecap, but I didn't cry.

As we arrived at Ms. Lou's, I was bubbling over with excitement. I wanted to show her my skinned knee yes, but I mostly wanted to tell her that I was now a first grader, and that I did it. I went to school, walked to her house, and everything was fine. And to top it off, I had my own red badge of courage. Stephen Crane could not have orchestrated it any better himself. A skinned knee never looked so good.

### **Formal Education**

In many ways, that first experience with public schooling set the tone for my life. From the beginning, I loved school and everything associated with it. I lived only a half mile from the school and walked home everyday up rolling hills that I dreaded. Nevertheless, there was nothing to dread about school itself. I couldn't wait to get there everyday. Ms. Fike became a defining person in my life.

I spent six years at North Amerson and loved all my teachers dearly. Junior high was more tumultuous, but mostly due to the age and not the school. I struggled with peer pressure, acne, and a double-line lunch room. I was not used to making so many decisions.

Mrs. Dunne, my ninth-grade teacher, was standing at the doorway on Open House. My mom, having worked a ten-hour shift, made herself presentable for the event and hurried with me to the school. After Mrs. Dunne shared the good news that I had earned

an A for the quarter just ended, she very earnestly said to my mother, “I truly believe Jeff will graduate from high school one day. I really do.”

The ride home was particularly troubling. For the first time, I became acutely aware of someone else’s expectations of me. In my mind, there was high school and then college and then . . . who knows what else? I was convinced in the power of schooling. My mother explained on the way home, that my dreams and expectations for myself were the only important ones.

My experience with Amerson High was mostly uneventful. I struggled with Biology and Accounting, but really loved reading Lord of the Flies. Working part time at the local burger joint took most of my evenings and nights, but I looked forward to college. My first cousin Mike was the only person I knew that had attended college, and I really liked him. I wanted to go to college too like Mike did. Besides, if I didn’t go to college, then I knew what was coming.

The city of Amerson was literally split in two. Norfolk and Southern Railroad was a major player in the textile industry on which Amerson depended. Part of the vernacular in Amerson included a reference to the tracks themselves. One section of Amerson lay west of the railroad and primarily included houses for the mill workers. This section, referred to as the mill hill, consisted of numerous city blocks of white, clapboard houses, all belonging to the textile mills lined along the railroad track.

The tenants rented the houses directly from the company, having monthly rent deducted straight from their earnings. Other than the mundane, cookie-cutter mill houses, there would be an occasional church. Those who resided on the mill hill referred

to their homes as being on the other side of the tracks when asked where they lived.

Likewise, when children asked their parents why this or that didn't happen, it was because they lived on the wrong side of the tracks. Not knowing exactly what that meant, we came to expect that answer. It was the same answer as "I don't know."

East of the tracks in Amerson, lay the business district and neighborhoods that were quite different from the mill neighborhoods. Here, the families of the town's lawyers, doctors, and bankers lived. The lives of the citizens of Amerson were as different as night and day, although the homes physically only a couple of miles apart.

The lives of the citizens of Amerson rarely intersected, albeit for two opportunities - the local places of business and the schoolhouse. North Amerson was the school of the mill hill and the west side of Amerson. Its place in our lives was as real to us as the actual hill it was perched upon. Looking out over a meadow and bordered by a slow-moving branch, it was the heart of all the kids on the mill hill.

My mother and father spent the entirety of their lives in the textile mill. My father, born in 1925 to a single mother, endured daily social scrutiny in an even smaller mill community. Although school was a place for him that permitted his spirit to soar, he dropped out in the eighth grade at the demanding of his mother to keep the family up. He worked in textiles from 1938 until his retirement in 1987, except for a two-year stint in the United States Navy during World War II in 1944. He returned in 1946, met my mother and married her. He was twenty-one, and she sixteen.

My mother was raised on a small farm. She too dropped out of high school to assist her family. Her mother, my grandmother, suffered with rheumatoid arthritis and died

unexpectedly when my mother was nineteen years old. Being alone with a world turned upside down, my grandfather, now a widower at forty, gave a small partial of his farmland to my mother and father to build a home. It was there that I was born, just to the side of the mill hill, but still firmly on the other side of the tracks.

It was a blessing that I enjoyed school. It was very clear what my future held if continuing my education was not in my plans. None of my two older brothers or one sister finished high school. I knew that if I did not make it in school, then I would have to make it in a mill.

Those tracks that split Amerson continued to play out as I continued my education. Junior high was the first time I had gone to school with students who were not from the mill hill. There was quite a social learning curve. Fewer and fewer of us from the mill hill were around the hallways as I moved through junior high and senior high school. School was the same. I loved being at school and looked forward to it, but the people around me was changing. Some adults in the community would ask me if I had any blacks in my class, but I really wondered why that was the question. Why wasn't the question "Do you have any doctor's or lawyer's kids in your class?"? North Amerson had only one African-American and that was my sixth grade teacher Mrs. Davies, and she was like my mom. What was the big deal?

I suppose I really noticed the tracks when I entered high school. I no longer was in the same classes as my new friends from junior high. Those students were in classes getting them ready for college. I was in classes with students who looked a lot more like the friends I had at North Amerson.

Courses in high school were assigned based on teacher recommendation, and all my teachers recommended courses that they said would most benefit me. I found myself in these standard courses all the way up through the twelfth grade. At the time I did not comprehend the impact of the track I was taking. I had taken a part-time job during my sophomore year so help out at home, working fifteen to twenty hours each week.

In the early spring of my senior year, my English teacher learned that I had been accepted to college. During a quiet activity, she summoned me to her desk.

“You’ve been accepted to college?” She asked.

“Yes”

She looked at me just for brief moment.

“We need to talk. Can you come by after school today for a few moments?” she asked.

“Of course”

That day after school, Mrs. Donald had a stack of books waiting for me on her desk when I arrived. She explained that there was some reading I was really going to need before I went off to college. In that stack were a few classics of literature and a handbook on grammar and usage.

It was a few years later that I understood. The school did not have the expectation of me attending college. The tracks were laid out very clearly. I was expected to go directly into the workforce. My mill hill friends and I, though few there were by this point, had been categorized throughout our public school experience in Amerson with the precision of a coin sorter.

My college experience was my great awakening. For the first time ever, I was in a place where no one knew who I was, and, more importantly, no one knew where I lived. It was not lost on me during my first visit to the small college community that there were no railroad tracks.

I was very cognizant of the fact that I was the first member of my family to attend college. Actually, I was the first to graduate from high school. Both of these facts made it especially important for me to do well and be successful. I knew I was having an opportunity that no one else in my family had. In a way, I was attending college as a substitution for my parents. I had seen first hand the hard work and sacrifices they made on my behalf, and I was the direct beneficiary.

My father thought that college was basically good for one thing: learning about business. He had often remarked on how I should study business and that is where my future lay. My mother, on the other hand, in true Campbellian form, simply implored me to follow my bliss.

As I began my course of study, I had no idea of where I wanted to go. I thought it might be business since that was a great mystery to me, but I did not have to decide right away since the college was liberal arts and would require two years of liberal arts courses before beginning in earnest on my major. As I moved into my sophomore year, I got a couple of introductory courses in business and found them to be utterly boring. At the end of the fall semester of my sophomore year, my life took a dramatic turn.

I had just finished meeting with my advisor prior to the semester break. As we were looking over course offerings and transcripts, he made the remark “Well, as least you are

going to be finished with those English classes after next semester.” I remember being disappointed. Some of my most memorable experiences thus far in college revolved around my English classes and professors.

I drove home the following afternoon. As I drove through the eastern North Carolina countryside, I was confronting a life decision. I had loved my English classes so much that I could not imagine not being in those courses. I had to decide if it was going to be a career in business as my father wanted or if I was going to study what I loved the most.

The discussion that followed brought many tears. My father cried because I was foregoing a business route, while my mother cried tears of joy over my decision to follow my heart.

From that first day in Mrs. Fike’s first-grade class, I felt drawn to teaching. My mother often recalled how I played school growing up prior to school, but I readily dismissed any desire to be a teacher prior to that drive home. However, with my decision to follow my heart in studying the English language, I readily accepted the possibility of being a teacher. In fact, I looked forward to it.

Like Donna Smith, I too share a working-class background. As Donna told the story of her childhood, it was easy to empathize with her experiences. The hot summer days playing outside as well as seeing on a daily basis your parents come home from jobs that they hated made quite the impression. I vowed to make the most of my schooling opportunities so that I would not have to work in a mill like my parents did. My dad worked in a mill for just over forty years, and my mom for close to fifty. I always

appreciated their hard work, but I was resolved never to allow their hard work be in vain. My accomplishments were going to be their accomplishments also.

### **A Vocation**

There was no doubt that becoming a teacher was a vocation for me in the true sense of the word. The word vocation, taken from the Latin *vocare*, means “to call,” and teaching was a calling for me, and it ran all the way back to my first experiences in Mrs. Fike’s class in first grade.

By all accounts, my career as an English teacher was very successful. I gained recognition on many different levels, both building-level, state and national. I thoroughly enjoyed the reading and writing of literature and seeing students develop their craft, even those who never suspected they had one. I enjoyed posing questions that extended beyond the text into real settings and situations. I marveled at students pondering the deeper queries of life through a Shakespearean play or sonnet. I especially felt proud of the community that was created each semester within the classroom.

For Christmas on senior year in college, my parents gave me a Samsonite briefcase, and it was a big deal. It signified that I was about to become a professional. I had just completed my student teaching experience at a large, rural high school in North Carolina, and I was preparing for my teaching career. It had been a good eighteen months since that fateful conversation with my parents during my sophomore year when I told them I was going to be a teacher. I remember the joy on my mother’s face and the concern in



my father's eyes. She knew all along that I was going to be a teacher, and he never knew that anyone could go to college for anything other than to be a business man.

During the summer immediately after graduation, I worked as a summer school instructor in a high-minority, high-poverty school. It was a seven-week high-intensity attempt to get students to learn what they had failed to in thirty-six weeks. I had a class of thirty-five students, all of whom would much rather be anywhere else besides the classroom. The principal of the school, Mr. Ratliff, would drop by my class about every other day. I actually received the job through a referral from another principal in the system who was interviewing for a full-time position coming up in the fall.

Mr. Ratliff would often stop by the afternoon after the students were dismissed. He would talk about his career and tell me how he was glad he wasn't just starting his career. As the summer session continued, he would stop by more frequently, and soon he started asking if I would be interested in coming to work there in the fall.

I enjoyed my time teaching summer school. It was a difficult assignment, but I didn't know any better. I needed the summer work, and I thought I might as well put my new degree to use.

As the summer drew to a close, I started getting lots of inquiries for full-time teaching positions. Several of my professors during my senior year told me that I would have a lot of jobs to choose from, mainly since I was male, certified to teach English, and liked athletics. And they were right. I had approximately ten offers for employment. After weighing all the options, I accepted an offer in the northeastern corner of North Carolina as the place to launch my teaching career.

Throughout my childhood, I never wandered too far from home. My family vacationed at Myrtle Beach each summer when the textile mills were closed for a week, and I had visited Florida a couple of times with my parents growing up. Now I was going to be living and teaching over 200 miles from home.

My interview took place in a smoke-filled principal's office, just to side of the main office. Mr. Braden had been the principal there for over twenty years, and he leaned back in his chair and asked me just a few questions.

“Can you coach?”

“Are you married?”

“Do you do sentence diagramming?”

Mr. Braden called me the next day and offered me the job, and he wanted verbal agreement since he was going on vacation and “wanted this spot filled before he left.” I asked for twenty-four hours to think it over before calling him back and accepting the job. I struggled all day and through the night on whether this was the right position for me to take. One minute, I felt like it was too far from my family and that with all the positions available and offers coming in, I should just wait for something closer to home. The next minute, I felt it was the perfect fit and was headed down east to start my career. Finally, at ten am the next morning, I called Mr. Braden and accepted the position at Roper High School as an English teacher.

August 1, came around soon that summer. I was assigned a coaching responsibility with the football team, so pre-season conditioning started some three weeks prior to school opening. About a week before classes started, Mr. Braden called me into his

office and asked me to teach an additional class for the year. The high school offered some early morning classes that started at 7:15 each morning and concluded at 8:00. These “EM” classes allowed students to get an extra credit in during the year. If I wanted to teach one this year, he said, he would pay me an extra 1/7 of my annual salary. I agreed to teach the class- not so much for the extra money, but because Mr. Braden had asked me to.

My teaching load that first year was mostly ninth grade English. The curriculum for ninth grade was for grammar mostly, and Mr. Braden made it clear that he wanted his freshmen to have a strong base in grammar. He also did not want them doing sentence diagramming since it never made any sense to him.

They say you never really learn anything yourself until you teach it. I truly learned grammar that first year. I thought I knew grammar fairly well, but I really got to know it then, although I was a little concerned that as an English major in college, only one semester of grammar was required for the degree. As the school year started, I thought I was perhaps going to be disappointed with teaching. In college, I really enjoyed my literature classes, and that is what I envisioned myself doing in the classroom; however, I was anything but disappointed. I really enjoyed teaching the grammar. Besides, I had the Early Morning class and it was American literature, so I still got to teach literature.

I believe I enjoyed it so much because I was fulfilling a lifelong dream. I remember thinking to myself how lucky I was to be a teacher. I also knew how proud my parents were of me, seeing me being able to work doing something I love and not having to labor in a textile mill.

I loved everything about teaching that year- The planning, preparing, grading, designing- everything. I was having a lot of fun, but I was also tired. Teaching five classes and coaching two sports will make you very tired.

My second year at the school was just as rewarding as the first. Over the past year, Joe, the basketball coach, and I had become good friends. He taught history just down the hall from me. We also had a common planning period since he was a coach, and all coaches had planning during the final period of the day. We would often talk during our planning periods. One day, he was talking about his students writing some legal briefs as extra credit for his history class, and how some of the students really struggled with their writing skills. What if, we asked, we could have a combination class of history and English? What if we were able to team teach such as class?

We both were excited about the possibilities. Mr. Braden was in the teacher's lounge one afternoon when we were talking about it. He asked if we would ever be interested in teaching some independent study during your planning time. His daughter was beginning college in the fall and was planning to attend law school. Maybe she could take an independent study class with me and Joe. Joe could instruct her in history, and I could mentor her writing.

The independent study class was a success. We eventually had a total of five students doing the same thing. Later in the spring, we were asked to present to the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) committee that was visiting our school on our new venture.

Sadly, that same spring brought some devastating news. Mr. Braden, our tough, filter less cigarette-smoking principal, was diagnosed with terminal lung and brain cancer.

During the summer following my second year of teaching, I got an offer to return to my home community and teach in a local high school. It wasn't the school I graduated from, but it was only ten minutes from where my parents lived, so I jumped at the chance. I started on August 1, at my new school- Starlight High School. That same afternoon I got a phone call from my friend Joe at Roper High informing me that Mr. Braden died that morning.

My new teaching assignment on the surface looked more similar than different from my first two years. It was a rural school compared to a small city school where I began, so I thought there wouldn't be much difference.

It was very different. My new school had about twenty-five percent fewer students than my first school, but they were all from the same socio-economic class. In my first school, we had students whose parents were doctors, lawyers, engineers, as well as blue-collar workers. At the new school, they were all farmers and blue-collar. There were no students whose fathers were doctors or lawyers.

My teaching assignment was much the same, except that now the majority of classes were tenth grade rather than ninth grade. At that time, tenth grade was more about composition and literature, so I was no longer in my grammar shoes all day. I had more flexibility in what I taught, and I appreciated that. One thing that did stay the same, was the coaching responsibilities. In fact, I was probably hired because they needed a coach rather than they wanted a good English teacher.

I noticed with this new population of student that very few had parents who had attended college. When asking about their plans after high school, most answered that they didn't know. Very few even mentioned going to college, and this was a big change from my first teaching position where everyone was expected to prepare for and attend college.

About half of my classes were "basic" classes. These classes were for those students who needed the credit to graduate, but they were not planning to continue beyond high school. These students were mostly male, and they spent most morning in school out in the vocational building. There they took auto mechanics, welding, agriculture, or woodworking. By the time they go to me in the afternoons, they were usually dirty, sweaty, and not interested in being in English class.

My basic students enjoyed my English class. Often one would say that they used to hate English but now they look forward to it. As a teacher I tried to make what we were doing in class relate to their worlds. Even though as graduates they would be able to go to college, most of them didn't want to go to college. They wanted to go straight to work. We used to talk about how so many of our students were perfectly okay with graduating school, buying a trailer, and going to work to pay the rent for the trailer. It seemed that there just wasn't any vision- no initiative to be anything more than what they had seen growing up. So often I heard my students telling me that it was good enough for their dads, then it was going to be good enough for them.

I believe my connection to these students was so positive since I shared a working class background with them just as Donna did with many of her students. There is just

something special about working with those students who have seen hard times and survived.

It was very important for me as a teacher to get my students involved in doing something in class. I learned that the time went by much faster for me when I was engaging the students in something active. I used to tell my students at the beginning of the school year that we were going to have fun if it killed them! I liked variety in what we gathered each day to do. I may have to teach the same novel or play each year, but I didn't have to teach it the same way, so I was always on the lookout for a fresh idea for teaching.

One of the big objectives in the curriculum for our basic students was basic skills. The standard course of study was big on basic reading skills such as reading a recipe, directions on a map, or finding information in an index or table of contents. One semester, I decided the best way to teach reading recipes was to actually cook or bake whatever the recipe was for. The students were really into it. I had asked for them all to give me some ideas of the types of things they would like to make – within reason that is. I picked out about a dozen or so recipes that could be created fairly easily with a few pots, pans, and perhaps a hot plate.

Students were given a recipe a few days in advance with instructions to plan to prepare the recipe in class. I secured all the necessary ingredients, and over a few days, the students created their masterpieces. It was really an enlightening exercise for me. Those students who struggled in reading really struggled with the close reading required

for cooking. It helped me use the activity as a diagnostic tool for reading. The students used it as an activity for eating in class.

Teaching my advanced or college bound students, was a challenge. While most of the students knew exactly what they wanted to do when they left high school, most of them had no idea how much work it was going to require for them to get there. While several teachers longed to teach the higher achieving students, it was more of an annoyance for me. First, the students from my basic classes never complained about doing the work. They worked hard for me all the time. The college-prep students constantly whined when it came to class work.

I continued in this school teaching tenth graders for five years. At the end of the fifth year, a teacher I worked with was named principal in a neighboring school system. As soon as he was named principal, he called me at home. The first thing he told me was the he wanted me to come to his school as the lead teacher for English. I was little surprised by his call. While we had worked together and even coached together, I didn't even know if he knew anything about my teaching. He continued on the phone with me saying that he did not just want me to join him, but that he needed me. Needed me?

I agreed over that summer to visit him in his new school. He gave me a tour around the school and campus. When we finished and returned to his office, he told me that he would be making me a formal offer in a couple of weeks. He went on to say that he needed someone with my dedication and leadership to head up his English department. In other words, he didn't just want me as a teacher in his school- he wanted me to be the head of his English department. I left there that afternoon a little bit confused.



As soon as I returned home, there was a message on my answering machine to call Mr. Alderson, the newly named principal of my current school Starlight. He wanted me to call him as soon as I got in.

“If it’s after 4 Jeff, then call me at home.”

I called Mr. Alderson. He wanted to know if I could come see him first thing the next morning. When I told him that I could, he said for me to come whenever I could and he would rearrange his schedule to speak with me.

The next morning, Mr. Alderson met with me in his newly occupied office. He started out by saying that he wanted to meet with all his teachers, and would do so later, but that he wanted to start with me. He said he had big plans for me, and he wanted me to be his new chair of the English department. It turns out that Mrs. Black, a colleague of mine at Starlight and English department chair, had accepted a position as an assistant principal at the end of the previous school year. He also wanted me to become the lead teacher with the twelfth graders.

On the way home, I thought it to be quite the coincidence that I was involved in two conversations so similar in just a span of two days. I learned later that Mr. Alderson had gotten word that I was visiting a high school in the neighboring district and wanted to quickly make sure that he didn’t lose me.

I ultimately decided to remain at Starlight. I suppose the overriding factor was that I did not want to start over again at a new high school. I enjoyed the students and staff at Starlight, and I was looking forward to being able to teach the literature that I really loved – British.

The start of that next year was very exciting for me. I was teaching a new curriculum, working with a different age group, and had volunteered to take on a new challenge. With the departure of Mrs. Black, the school yearbook publication lost its faculty advisor. I agreed to head up the yearbook, having been a part of the yearbook staff in college.

I really threw myself headlong into the yearbook. That was an opportunity for me to have a project and teach students how to set goals and work together to achieve them. I met with Mr. Alderson and shared my vision for the yearbook and the journalism program. After hearing me, he simply told me to go for it and let him know what I needed.

I set up a process by which students interested in being in journalism had to demonstrate their writing and time management ability in order to be considered for the staff. Because of the long number of hours required in meeting publication deadlines, there weren't a lot of students who were interested in working that hard; however, I was able to select fifteen students that first year.

My classes were fantastic. It was really eye opening to me how much difference two years made from the sophomores I was teaching daily to the seniors who were in my classes now.

The yearbook was the first classroom experience that was close to what I thought athletics were supposed to be about. In coaching athletics, it's very clear that you are working with a group of individuals to accomplish a singular goal. For example, you coach football with the knowledge that you have eleven players who have specific

positions with specific rules. Yet, the challenge is to get all eleven of them to work together within the rules of their individual positions to achieve a common outcome. All sports in high school work the same way—even with individual sports like track and field and golf. The individual performances are grouped together to get a team result.

Yearbook gave me the opportunity to bring a team concept into the classroom. Organizing those twelve to fifteen students with unique responsibilities and strengths to produce a singular product – a yearbook—on a tight deadline, was very similar to coaching. Doing so required technical skills on my part with teaching writing and design skills, but it also required human relations skills such as goal setting, motivating, and framing.

I suppose my new teaching assignment with twelfth graders was affected by my newly acquired responsibility with teaching the journalism class. As I began to re-think teaching an academic course (journalism) in a coaching context, I began to do the same with my English classes. Although we were not ultimately producing a final, finished tangible product such as a book, we were working together to turn out a finished intangible product such as a life—poised to move on to college, work, or military.

My philosophy in teaching my classes was that every student everyday should read, write, view, and speak in my class. Reading and writing was the most obvious for an English classroom, but viewing and speaking was a little out of the ordinary for my students. I explained to my students that English class was about language and communicating.

I suppose British Literature was my favorite for a couple of different reasons. For one, it covered quite a long period of time chronologically. We would start the semester with Anglo-Saxon literature and move up to the twentieth century by the end of the semester. Secondly, it gave students an opportunity to experience literature in the context of a different time and place. None of my students had ever been to England, so they were learning about culture as well as literature.

Teaching Chaucer's Canterbury Tales was a great experience for me. Other than the normal struggles of language and poetry for students to come to grips with, they always made a lot of discoveries about themselves when we did Canterbury Tales.

After we examined the literary and historical context of the poem, I used the piece to teach them about people and how we make assumptions based on appearances. We would go through the Prologue meticulously, looking at every detail Chaucer gave us about each character. In some cases, the assumptions we made as we read were similar to the assumptions those in Chaucer's day would have made. In some cases, cultural differences got in the way.

Nevertheless, students often learned so much about themselves. I taught them about the idea of a person's voice versus their gaze—that is who a person is versus whom people assume they are by their appearances. Developmentally, most of my students were at a place that they could identify since some of these issues. They were often struggling with being themselves in a culture that was consistently telling them how they should dress, what they should eat, and where they should live. I often had students who socially came alive after the Canterbury Tales unit.

Shakespeare's Macbeth had a similar effect on my students as well. I would begin the unit asking them to consider a hypothetical situation in which they were visiting at the local mall and happened by the kiosk of a fortuneteller. What if that fortuneteller told you that you would gain admittance to the college of your dreams, graduate from college, and be very successful monetarily for the rest of your life?

This scenario with the fortuneteller's questions was to draw a parallel with Macbeth's encounter with the witches at the beginning of the play, and it leads us to the larger question of the play: Why, when we know right from wrong, do we choose to do wrong anyway?

The larger themes of Macbeth such as unchecked ambition, betrayal, and the contrast between appearances and reality, are again, very developmentally appropriate for high school students, and my students were always very interested in discerning answers to the questions. It turns out that those are pretty good themes for leadership as well. They gained a very deep appreciation for Shakespeare in my class perhaps mostly because he was good at asking questions that no one really could answer.

The witches plant the seed of ambition in Macbeth at the beginning of the play, and the remainder of the play sees him unravel and descend into despotism.

An important question my students often mulled over was within the fortuneteller kiosk scenario. If you were told what was going to happen in the future, would you let those events come to you, or would you take action to make them happen? For example, would you work hard in the classroom during your senior year, study for the SAT and write and rewrite your college essay in order to gain admittance to the college of your

dreams? Would you work hard once you got into your dream college in order to graduate?

My point to them was they should be persons of action rather than being persons who are acted upon. Since we do not know the future, we should be making choices to be active rather than passive. I reminded them that their past has made them who they are, but their options going forward will determine who they will be.

I suppose my entire perspective as a teacher was for the literature we read to become a mirror for who we are and a template for who we can become. It was about letting the text ask questions that the individual can only answer for himself.

Often when others would ask me what I do for a living, I would say that I teach. They would usually respond with “What do you teach?” I would say simply: Students. There might be a brief, corny laugh.

“Seriously, what do you teach?”

I teach about life.

### **Adventures in Leadership**

I made the formal move into leadership after thirteen years as a high school English teacher. After one year of full-time study in graduate school, I began the second year as an assistant principal intern at a K-8 school. My internship supervisor suggested I work my internship in a different grade range than what I had taught in since the degree and license from the state would be for kindergarten through twelfth grade.

I was surprised at how much I enjoyed working with the younger students, and I was also surprised at how much I needed to learn about curriculum for all those age spans. At the end of the internship, I accepted a position as an assistant principal in the same high school in which I had taught for eleven years. For two years, I was waging some silent battles. On one hand, the familiarity of the school and the staff was a nice addition to my responsibilities. On the other hand, familiarity breeds contempt. I was dismayed at the difference in the quality of instruction across the school, which was a perspective that I never had, nor could have, as a classroom teacher.

After two years, I received my first principal position when I was appointed as principal of yet another K-8 school. I spent the next three years as principal of two elementary schools. In the meantime, my family situation was continually changing.

During the spring of my third year, a fellow administrator and friend of mine asked me to accompany him to a job fair in one of the neighboring, large urban school systems. Agreeing to do so, I was surprised when a side conversation with an official transpired into a job offer. Having turned down the offer three times, I eventually accepted when the offer became too good to refuse.

The next five years brought a lot of good learning experiences. As part of a large, urban school system, administrators are continually shuffled among schools. In those five years, I worked in three different schools and had the opportunity to learn much about leadership, schools, and cultures. I was always amazed in how much schools can differ from one to the next even when so close in proximity.

## **A New Story**

In June 2010, I began a new story as a part of my leadership journey. I accepted a position as vice president of instruction at a small community college in central North Carolina. While it was my first experience with post-secondary education, it was a transition made fairly easy due to my leadership experiences in various schools with all the varieties of students, leaders, and cultures.

The call of leadership has led me through both rural and urban schools and communities. It has placed me in high poverty schools as well as affluent suburban schools. I have been privileged to work with other leaders using all types of leadership styles, and while I learned much in what to do as a leader, I learned just as much in what not to do.

Leadership, too, has become my vocation just as teaching English did some twenty-five years ago. Much like those first years in the classroom, I am still searching to transform organizations and people like Donna Smith, but I am also searching to involve others in the leadership journey as Stuart Poston has learned to do. Unlike Billy Jones, there is no ego involved in my journey, for leadership is about a testimony rather than a title, contribution rather than position.



## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSION

[We] need a revolution in how we think about leadership and how we develop leaders. Most management and leadership development programs ignore or demean spirit. They desperately need an infusion of poetry, literature, music, art, theatre, history, philosophy, dance, and other forms that are full of spirit (Bolman and Deal, 1995, pp.167-168).

As an English teacher I was continually amazed at the power of literature to captivate, inspire, and move people. Throughout my career I moved in and out of the stories of the lives of my students as well as my colleagues, spending my days immersed in great works of literature.

My interactions with those stories and relationships felt in a very personal way to be a developmental program for leadership, and an anonymous note from one of my students on a warm, spring afternoon planted a seed in my mind about the power of language, stories, relationships, and leadership. The harvest for that is a lifetime of learning about the lives, language, and leadership of English teachers who have become leaders, and it will continue.

Pondy (1978) suggested that leadership was a language game, one with rules that served to make activity meaningful. The connection between language and leadership is interesting and complex, and the telling, collection, and analysis of these stories serves as a pique to further interest and a glimpse into the possibilities for investigating the complexities. Throughout this process I learned about the power and essence of language

not as a transparent medium for the pure distillation of information, but rather as a deep semantic link to realities. It is a form of life on its own, active and transforming us as we shape it.

### **The Journey**

When I began I was searching for former English teachers who were currently educational leaders. Having found them, I was interested in their life stories and how they interpreted the connection between their humanities-based background and leadership, and I learned several things.

In Donna Smith I learned of a passionate leader who is an untiring advocate for her students and staff and constantly pursuing excellence. Donna and I share a rural, southern working-class background as well as an enduring belief in the transforming power of literature. Donna's story and the language she uses suggests her to be a strong, transformative leader who has a vision for not only the organization, but also for all the members involved. She believes in the value of academics and makes a strong symbolic stand by involving the football team in a book study. Her love of reading allows her to connect intimately with her students. She has high expectations and values for all with whom she comes in contact.

She offers personal support to the students going through difficult times. She does so through personal calls and contacts, but she also utilizes that with which she knows has a deep intimate connection: literature. She does so with a good sense of humor, feeling confident that she is doing just what she was meant to be doing.

In Stuart Poston I learned about a man who credits his very position as the president of a college on his ability to communicate, something he attributes to his decision to major in English. He understands in communicating that not only is it important to be a good communicator, but one must also understand that those from certain backgrounds, notably the humanities, are eager to participate and expect to be a part of decision making.

Stuart facilitates leadership on his campus through first establishing and then maintaining effective communication networks. He makes connections across his campus by physically visiting, connecting with the students and staff, and establishing structures that facilitate involvement and commitment. Having found the college as place where decision making was top centered upon his arrival, he made structural adjustments so others could join in on collectively leading the organization.

In Billy Jones I learned about a leader who is perpetually in search of a center stage. The road to his next leadership position is paved with individuals who recognized his inborn talent and propelled him along. His flair for the dramatic and self-proclaimed unique talents epitomizes the narcissistic leader. His readily available list of names and contacts gave him easy access to individuals who would be unsuspecting prey to his silver tongue.

I was expecting to find some leaders like Donna. That is, someone who is passionate about reading and fosters that in those who work around her, someone who was well read and had the ability to draw upon that reading in transforming the lives of those with

whom she comes in contact, and someone who viewed the humanities as an extension of who they were.

I was also expecting to find someone like Stuart—a leader committed to involving people, learning from the mistakes of others, and understanding the mission-critical importance of communicating well and including others.

I was not expecting to find someone like Billy Jones, nor was I expecting to find an English major who choose the major for purely pragmatic reasons; however, he taught me about a completely new vein of leadership that I would never have learned otherwise.

### **Making Connections**

Research suggested much in common among the humanities, teaching, and leadership, and in reflecting on the lives of Donna, Billy, and Stuart, I learned several things.

Undoubtedly the process of teaching, the humanities in general, and the enterprise of leadership all engage in the making of meaning. Donna is passionate concerning making school and life meaningful for her students and staff, and in the process, it gives her life meaning as well. Stuart is able to find meaning and create it for others through his experience as an English professor, but also through his experience as a member of an organization in the thralls of poor leadership. He empowers others as president to find meaning through participation in leading.

Teaching, leading, and the humanities all involve discourse, or dialogue as fundamental. Both Donna and Stuart savor the conversations that take place surrounding

their daily lives as leaders, and it became evident in telling of their life stories. Donna seems to draw strength both personally and professionally through interactions with others. Stuart sees it as essential to his quest of involving everyone in leading.

Donna best personifies literature as a humanizing, aesthetic experience. Her ability to make the most of her love of reading and extensive bookshelf allows her to bring the aesthetic into the lives of her students and staff. While Stuart does not deal with the aesthetic of literature, he does capitulate to the setting of his campus along the Blue Ridge Mountains in his quest to make possible leadership from various stakeholders.

As the leader of her high school, Donna Smith seeks to transform it and the individuals associated with it through the use of literature and love of learning, and in the process, she moves students to do the same. Stuart is in the process of transforming an organization that traditionally has been mostly autocratic to a more facilitative constitution. Billy is perpetually transforming himself in order to get the next position and all the perks associated with it.

Donna empathizes with her students and responds to them personally, while Stuart has compassion for those who want to participate in leadership but are not invited to be a part of it. Donna's empathy comes primarily out of her experience growing up in a working class environment, whereas Stuart's originates from being a faculty member in a bad situation at one time. Billy appears to be incapable of empathizing as he works his way through various leadership positions.

## **Preparing for Leadership**

Each of the participants speaks openly about the benefits of his or her humanities background on their current leadership, and if one were to ask them, they would feel very strongly that there was a connection between their background as an English teacher and their leadership. Donna actually spoke less outwardly about a direct connection; rather she made a more direct connection with her love of reading as a child to her effectiveness as a leader.

Billy explicitly stated that his “skills” as an English major was his vehicle to leadership since he chose English as an undergraduate program of study versus business. His humanities background then was a deliberate choice he made in order to be an effective leader (that is, as he defines both effective and leader).

Stuart too feels strongly about his English background and its connection to leadership. In fact, he attributes his current position as college president to his humanities background. He does so, however, founded upon his observation that those from the humanities have an innate desire to be participants in the act of leading rather than passive observers of others leading.

Those leaders who have a humanities background such as Donna, Billy, and Stuart may bring something unique to their positions as leaders; however, my hypothesis that the humanities provide the best route for preparing leaders was not supported by this study. Bolman and Deal speak about the need for a revolution, in which there is an infusion of spirit, and the humanities expose us to the human spirit through the arts, language, and literature; yet, nothing prepares the leader as well as life experiences. Like

Donna, we can look for places to take that which we love and find passionate and infuse them into our work. Like Stuart, we can recognize problems and the need for help and then volunteer ourselves as part of the solution. Becoming wide awake (Greene, 1977) to these opportunities will give meaning to the work we do as leaders and infuse us with that much needed spirit.

The life stories of these individuals do not suggest that a career as an English teacher is a preferred route to leadership. They do suggest that one's life story is a rich place to examine experiences and along with the interpretation of those experiences, find the genesis of leadership.

### **On Lives, Language, and Leadership**

Just as Bennis and Nanus (1985) note the myriad of definitions offered for leadership, there are also numerous complexities surrounding leadership. The life stories of Donna, Billy, and Stuart illustrate the complexity of leadership as practiced in the context of daily interactions and framed by past experiences. Donna's rural working-class upbringing somehow impacts her interactions in the rural high school she seeks to lead out of its low-performing status. Likewise, Stuart's observation of a leader in trouble impacts on his own leadership philosophy and subsequent style in leading at his new college. Billy's experience in leading an activity at Boys' State makes an indelible print in his memory and sets early on the course of his career.

Leadership is much more than a theory or checklist of behaviors. It is a rich blend of experiences, beliefs, and convictions. It arises from one's upbringing, positive and

negative experiences, and sometimes even pure happenstance. It may come from following your hopes and dreams when you realized how much you liked working with students like Howard, and it may come from realizing that you have a way with words. In any case, leadership can come from any place at any time, emerge and change the lives of people and the course of institutions.

The lives of leaders, the language they use, and the leadership they demonstrate are all fraught with ambiguity. Donna's life is an adventure in twists and turns that lead her eventually to college, later graduate school, and eventually to the principalship. Billy finds opportunities in making connections with individuals in graduate school, and seizing opportunities to open a new school and move into district-level leadership early in his career. Stuart's observation of a leadership in trouble opened the door for him to exercise leadership that eventually led to a new career. All of them encountered uncertainty along their routes to leadership, and all of them persevered. Donna perseveres in part due to her solid work ethic as well as her determination to work doing something she loves. Billy perseveres through selling himself and his skill set, while Stuart is able to do so as a result of offering himself.

Language itself is a powerful and interesting aspect in leadership. While most may consider language to simply be a means of communicating, it is much more than that. As Burke (1969) reminds us, language moves people, that is, it does not just tell people how things are, but also it forms who they are. Donna communicates the events of her life through her story, but in addition to the events and circumstances, her language also communicates who she is—her values, beliefs, and priorities. In turn, those values,



beliefs, and priorities shape who she is as a leader. Likewise, Billy and Stuart are shaped by the language they use, and it becomes a part of who they are both as individuals and as leaders.

Pondy (1978) first coined the phrase language game when referring to leadership, saying that language makes activity meaningful for others. The lives of Donna, Billy, and Stuart, and the language they use suggest that activity is indeed made meaningful by the language employed. The continued examination into the connection between language and leadership would be an interesting venture and one that could add much to leadership studies. Future leaders would benefit by engaging in language studies and developing a self-consciousness concerning the language they employ. Subsequent studies in analyzing leadership language would further develop leaders in the intricacies of making activity meaningful.

Finally, leadership preparation programs would do well to ground future leaders in the various paradigms of leadership. An awareness and distinction among behavioral and trait theories would go far in paralleling an examination of the language of leadership.

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