**Supporting School Systems in the Face of Transition Challenge: Leading Across Political Boundaries**



**MLD 202: Cross-Cultural Leadership**

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When I was five years old, my parents decided to end the romantic aspect of their relationship and carry out their lives in different cities. As this process took shape, my own narrative about the world began to take on more of a divided tone. The narrative surrounding my mom was loosely characterized by nature, Northern California culture, progressive politics, authentic communication, sharing feelings, transformational workshops, communal living, and “being present.” In my mom’s home it was important to “get each other”before we “got dessert.” The word *communication* was usually spoken in the context of discussing feelings. Mom was a women’s rights activist and midwife who offered her birthing services to poor, disenfranchised women. She believed in the wisdom of Steiner-Waldorf education, in which students were entrusted with quite a bit of authority to co-create their own curriculum. Part of our childhood narrative was captured by the 70s education program and set of songs titled *Free to Be*… *You and Me.* It was her intention for us to be “free to be.” In terms of Hofstede’s dimensions, she generally encouraged small power distances between kids and adults, as well as between adults within their societal and organizational arrangements. She preferred collectivism to individualism, flexibility with respect to taking on gender roles, and an ease in acknowledging and “being OK with” uncertainty. Short-term expressions of emotions, even if they required time she could not necessarily afford, took precedence over the tendency to hold back in the interest of longer-term thrift.

Then came summer. As we ended the school year, my sister Terri and I nervously boarded Southwest Airlines and flew an hour and a half south to spend a month with our dad in the hottest city in the northern hemisphere—Phoenix, Arizona. My dad was the son of an American diplomat who worked in the State Department and co-ran Radio Free Europe, a communication organization designed to interrupt Soviet radio propaganda in Eastern Europe so that Western news could make its way through the awkward folds of an iron curtain. To my dad, the word “communications” was more associated with the strength of the message of a political party or which politician expressed his views in a way that gained media attention. While dad’s attention was on who got media attention, my sister and I wanted *his* attention. If we made reference to feelings, dad often responded with a furrowed brow, a wry smile, and a teasing yet sarcastic comment like “Is that your mom’s psycho-babble?”

He was a proponent of radical self-reliance and was suspicious of therapy groups. Our best chance at connection with dad was to glean all we could from the Sunday night episode of *60 Minutes* and take the conversation from there; of utmost importance was listening to the golden, witty, and sarcastic words of Andy Rooney. Through the lens of Hofstede, dad had what at first glance seemed like a contradictory set of cultural dimensions. He believed his power should not be questioned too much personally but felt it was important to challenge authority in the political realm. He tended to stress self-reliance and individualism but admired collective political movements for change. He had a strong masculine presence and could be a bit sexist, yet he supported the notion of women having political authority. He navigated comfortably in the realm of uncertainty, was a staunch atheist/agnostic and was very suspicious of societies with too much fundamentalist religious tradition (including the United States). While he erred on the side of thrift and saving, he held strong beliefs about social programs for the poor and disenfranchised. In retrospect, given my parents’ different orientation on the emotional realm, it’s not surprising their marriage did not work.

The divorce was difficult on my sister and me. We hungered to find bridges that spanned both our parents’ narratives; I vividly remember my sister and I staying up late in our early teens pondering the link between these two vitally important people in our lives. Finding connection reduced our anxiety and eased the hurt associated with the separation. And, to our delight, we soon discovered that one of the most powerful narrative bridges was their shared liberal political viewpoints. We later learned that when they met in college one of their strongest bonds was their progressive values. This shared political narrative didn’t *just* represent our parent’s shared world. It was also broad enough to integrate seamlessly with many compelling societal narratives and stories from the Left: progressives were the noble, critical thinkers trying to do good while they valiantly resisted the oppression from the right-leaning, capitalist bad people.

We grew up watching every women’s rights victory accompanied by cheers from my mom. Whenever a liberal representative on *60 Minutes* or a liberal member of a debate-oriented show made a good point against a conservative my dad shouted “got him” with the same enthusiastic gusto he did when Muhammad Ali landed a good punch in a boxing match. Liberals, like Muhammad Ali, were “the greatest.” A significant aspect of my dad’s narrative as a teen in 50s took shape when my grandfather—a diplomat and writer—supported lefty underdogs like Adlai Stevenson against the likes of the much more popular general of World War II, Republican Dwight Eisenhower. My dad explained, with much conviction, that Stevenson was not only the good guy but the smart guy who never stood a chance against Ike, a candidate liked by “the mindless masses who sucked down root beer floats at drive-in theaters within the Republican, suburban culture of 1950s America.” It seemed to my sister and I that it all fit together like a well-constructed puzzle: liberal and progressive beliefs were correct and anyone “on the right” of the political spectrum was, in fact, *not* “ethically right.” All evidence pointed to liberal progressives being the better critical and scientific thinkers, superior in ethical reasoning, and perhaps even higher up on the evolutionary ladder.

My sister and I held tightly to this narrative because it also provided an even greater sense of meaning for us: our most *immediate* family may have been separated but it appeared that both our parents existed within a “broader family” made up of liberal Democrats and progressive activists. We knew very well that while the Republicans claimed “family values” belonged to them, our broader liberal family had perhaps even more “family value” than a nuclear family. From an emotional standpoint, the liberal view that many conservatives in power *unjustly oppress the weak* played itself out in the context of our mom’s counseling and social work career: her moving stories had the effect of strumming our emotional harp (and heart) strings. My mom’s eventual landing point in my early teens—Berkeley, California—helped reinforce the perception that our personal narrative synthesized with that narrative that existed outside ourselves. Berkeley was, and is, one of the most multicultural and cross-cultural cities in the country while being *not* so diverse with respect to political orientation. Almost everyone from the upper-middle class homes in the hills was still generally politically progressive, the Berkeley middle class was mostly left-leaning, and the far-Left factions bore great similarity to the current Occupy movement. In this sense, in my childhood it did not *feel* like culture mattered in determining behavior as much as did peoples’ political orientation and belief system around the appropriate role of government. So it was within this context of the self-named People’s Republic of Berkeley—a kind of political bubble—that I looked out at, and made meaning of, the rest of the world. As I looked out my “Story of Self” window I saw a *correspondingly compatible* “Story of Us.”

In many ways I’ve woven together my parents’ narratives into my own. I credit my mom for my interest in transformation, psychology, and counseling. I credit my dad with my interest in history, politics, cultural issues, and international relations. These dual narratives were important factors in forming a career that included a bit of each of them: transformative professional development and Social Studies curriculum specialization within education leadership. I worked my way up various levels in the education hierarchy from teaching History and Government to positions of higher authority like head of the Social Studies department and Director of school. For the most part I worked in the liberal, progressive school systems similar to those in which I was raised. About halfway through my career, in August 2001, I found myself as the equivalent of a Social Studies curriculum specialist for a district. But this was a district that operated within a community quite different from the ones I’d worked in before. While liberal in some pockets, this district was interspersed with a much higher percentage of families who associated themselves with the center of the political spectrum and a good-sized faction who more or less fell to the political right. It was a change of culture that I could manage and from which I assumed my horizons might even expand.

Soon my conception of culture change took on an entirely new level of meaning.

About three weeks into this position, on a Tuesday morning, I awoke to the news that two passenger planes had plunged into the twin towers of Manhattan’s World Trade Center, another plane had hit the Pentagon in Washington D.C., and almost 3,000 had been killed. Like many other people who were in various states of denial and shock, the news occurred to me as a kind of fiction. Throughout the district that week, my colleagues and students gazed in disbelief at the television as we attempted to make sense of these horrific events. As I was head of the Social Studies curriculum, many gravitated toward me, perhaps under the assumption that as an authority figure I might help them to piece all this together. The truth was that even after years of studying history and politics, I was pretty confused myself; the roots of this conflict, after all, in many ways extended back to the Middle Ages. So I did what I thought I could do, initiating and joining in long conversations within the school community in an attempt to get perspective. I worked with several Social Studies teachers on how they might incorporate these events into their current curriculum and how to frame productive conversations.

Even at the time, several friends in the district shared the opinion that we’d entered into a different historic era. We guessed that September 11, 2001 would become a key demarcation point between Social Studies textbook units, right along with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet system. With a couple years of school counseling under my belt, I did my best to help counselors alleviate overwhelming student anxiety. I played a small leadership role in addressing problems related to newly inflamed ethnic/racial conflicts. Some on staff needed their own counseling to deal with the shock of these events. We had some contact with educators in New York whose problems were, of course, even more magnified. While New York as an education community experienced these events as more of a *crisis challeng*e, our district was faced with what felt like an almost insurmountable *transition challenge*.

Perhaps *because* of my own childhood narrative split, I resonated with the wider scale narrative split that began to emerge in our district. I felt district viewpoints begin to polarize. Some within our culture demonstrated greater intolerances for uncertainty than had previously been the case. There was an increased gap between those who conceptualized these events from a short-term orientation and those from a long-term orientation. Debates flared about whether the United States was attacked because of its belief in individual freedom or because of its oppressive overseas policies. These splits and their corresponding disequilibrium were greater than anything I’d experienced in my many years in education. And, as logic would dictate, the tensions and uncertainties around topics related to Social Studies curriculum—my area of responsibility—was greater than it was around other academic disciplines. As I visited classes I watched conflict erupt regularly, sometimes accompanied by students and teachers looking to me for solutions to their frustrating and puzzling problems. My learning curve was steep as it pertained to navigating “successful” Social Studies learning in the district. On more turbulent days, students and teachers looked to my authority for leadership in addressing the increasing cases of students(mostly white, pro-American) bullying students of Middle Eastern descent.

Like many school communities in the United States, ours was characterized by a wide variation with respect to socioeconomics, politics, religion, and culture. The dysfunction and breakdown that emerged in our district occurred along complex cultural fault-lines. Perhaps the most challenging aspects of my position in an authority role was my difficulty observing from the safety and objectivity of the “balcony.” As a liberal member of the administration I often felt myself rumbling and shaking as if directly *on top* of those fault-lines. I experienced an odd combination of being respected and revered by liberals as a liberal authority figure, while my authority role resulted in a *decreased* level of distrust and hostility amongst conservatives. My authority as a liberal head of Social Studies pedagogy had become, in a sense, like a suit of armor (Williams lecture), both protecting me *and* weighing me down. During these months, I empathized with many multi-hat-wearing superintendents who bore the burden of receiving blame for, and very little acknowledgement from, various factions within their school districts and cities.

The events of 9/11 were the first attack on American soil since Pearl Harbor in World War II. Images and videos of the collapsing Twin Towers flooded the Internet and news. The fault-lines that represented the boundary between liberal and conservative perspectives were highly shaky and unstable. My own intense relationship to the political divide served to magnify my experience of how powerful, all-encompassing, and often blinding the political narrative can be in a district. Even when equipped with perspective-taking transformative workshops from my teens and young-adult years, I felt helpless in my attempt to escape the gravitational pull of this powerful narrative. I could “get” a wide variety of cultural differences in people, but I just could not seem to “get” the conservative perspective. The liberal angels and conservative demons in my mind played such convincing roles that I assumed they were *not acting*. While my career formal authority went up by the age of 35, part of me was still the 25-year-old History teacher who cheered when little Noam Chomsky manifestos were slipped unknowingly into Social Studies textbook boxes of some local school districts. Liberal viewpoints seemed exciting and romantic, and I carried aspects of that romance into my mid-30s at this job, and in my life generally. And yet as the political conflicts in my district became increasingly inflamed, the charm seemed to dissipate. As my own boundaries were crossed I was forced to confront my up-until-then most-cherished Lefty viewpoints. My political narrative, rather than inciting romance in the heart, occurred more like an artery that had hardened over time and lost its flexibility.

To my shock, American flag images emerged all over the homes, cars, clothes, and songs of our community. One principal of a school started wearing an American flag sweater she’d kept in the closet for many years. I wasn’t in Kansas anymore. Back in Berkeley, patriotic display was associated with shame; to go too far in that direction was to risk being an “ugly American.” And yet an increasing faction of colleagues and teachers openly expressed the conviction that the ugliness was reserved for “those Middle Eastern terrorists who wanted to take away America’s freedoms.” Many conservatives, some undoubtedly borrowing words from their factions in the media, claimed that those on the political left were “not in reality” or “blind to the real threat to the country.” Some of the most conservative members of the community characterized those with Berkeley roots as potential traitors to the exceptionalist American cause. In more extreme cases, a general suspicion arose in parts of our district that liberals were sympathetic with the terrorists. In some subsets of our district, progressive images and logos on clothes were frowned upon, long hair was suspect, and Middle Eastern students were marginalized and/or threatened.

In the classes I observed at the Social Studies curriculum authority I could sense an increasing split between students and teachers of differing political persuasions. Conservative students complained about how some liberal teachers taught their class, expressing rage at the Chomskian suggestion that selfish and oppressive American policies contributed to a backlash in various Middle Eastern communities. A group of conservative students were very angry when they heard a liberal teacher suggest that “America had it coming.” They wanted me—the authority figure—to “do something about it.” Some liberal teachers used Jeremy Diamond-esque arguments that the Twin Towers collapse resulted from a unhealthily competitive orientation and an overconsumption of resources, suggesting that United States was in the process of *choosing to collapse.* Because Americans felt they had to *stay* *on top—*the narrative goes—they now face the reality that the “top towers” had *collapsed to the* *bottom*! Some members of the liberal faction of teachers would probably have embraced the views of Kishore [Mahbubani](http://www.mahbubani.net/), that the American fall was highly connected to the smug condescension and arrogance of the West. Conservative students yearned to get one teacher fired when he confessed to students that he *clapped* when he heard about the fall of the Twin Towers because the towers represented the oppressive, capitalist, financial establishment. Once again I felt split as an authority: on one hand, calling on my mom’s compassion, this teacher’s actions seemed cruel. Yet from a political standpoint I, too, disliked the way financial firms contributed to so many destructive events on our earth. I grappled with what “leading” should look like in this case.

On the political left, many students complained about the way more conservative teachers framed and carried out discussions in their classes about current events. They took offense at the over-generalized uses of the word “terrorist” and the inaccurate and discriminatory lumping together of qualities associated with different cultural groups. They hated the sense of guilt-by-cultural-association. They spoke out against views (perhaps characterized by Samuel Huntington) that vastly differing culture and value systems would never work out their differences and that America needed to refresh, remember, and rebuild its Protestant ethic and cultural exceptionalism. Liberal students objected to more conservative teachers’ (and Huntingtonian) views that the multicultural assault on American values was watering down the true strength of the country.

Coupled with this political anger and chaos came extraordinary work avoidance. Extreme debates and a fixation with being “right” often crowded out the important work of teachers’ skillfully seizing and taking advantage of teaching moments so as to orchestrate a deeper and more effective student learning. Sadly, these divisions were a reminder of the relative impermeability of these boundaries in the larger national context: many Democrats and Republicans’ don’t honor the validity of contrary narratives, to the point that our government is often dysfunctional and comes close to reaching gridlock over controversial issues.

Historical events don’t play out in straight, neat lines; their path is more closely likened to the irregular patterns of nature. Especially in times of such duress, our country and its institutions demand the rare kind of leadership that takes into account the organic, changing nature of events and circumstances. It needs *adaptive leadership* in order to deal effectively with *adaptive challenges*. Technical solutions like reactionary bureaucratic announcements, which did not honor the deep songs beneath the surface words of our district, could not help our district adapt in necessary ways. We needed leadership that could stay focused while attending to complex sets of problems that shifted and changed at an alarmingly unpredictable rate. Like electrons eluding detection from the measuring instrument of a physicist, our unpredictable and slippery problems were difficult to accurately diagnose and “pin down.”

To exercise real leadership I would have to face the reality that my fundamental narrative toward these events put me squarely on the Left. There was no way to deny that almost all of my conversations with close friends over coffee or drinks included the witty liberal quotes and jokes that reinforced the beliefs under which I had been raised. And my bias showed on the job. On the few occasions I did speak my political truth, a middle school teacher who was particularly hostile to my viewpoint accused me of being a “bleeding-heart liberal” who would be happy if America “went down the tubes.” He even asked me to go back to Berkeley. As I protected myself from future wounds, I closed up and doubted myself and my ability to lead. I knew I had biases but did not know how to make my biases “explicit” (Williams, lecture). I’d done some self-*reflection* but not so much self*-detection* (Williams, 2006). I tried to be an objective observer, but more often than not felt like an imposter. I was terrified to step down from the balcony to authentically join the dangerous dance floor of political opinion. I wondered, in fact, what it even *meant* to be *authentic* if, in fact, my “authentic truth” was the result of a deeply grooved narrative that “constructed me” as much or more than I “constructed it.” I struggled in district meetings, doubting my own ability to make solid distinctions between my own narrative and some amorphous, “deeper truth.” Wrapped up inside my armor, I stayed paralyzed, wondering what hoops I needed to jump through to survive in this position. Like Zhao in China, I feared that if I did *not* jump through the right hoops, I might *lose my authority altogether*. I was scared.

District disequilibrium reached dangerous levels. I looked for examples of what previous district Social Studies curriculum heads had done in the past when planes were flown into skyscrapers and found no examples to guide me. I didn’t even know who to *be* next; how could I make decisions about what to *do* next? So I cautiously experimented. I held well-intentioned meetings with colleagues and managed to contribute a bit to carving out piecemeal solutions to parts of what we thought were the most pressing problems. I tried to visualize and imagine being raised with a different political narrative, which was much easier said than done. I wondered just how much choice and free will I really had with respect to my narrative and sensed I had to look deeply at how my narrative was constructed. One of the most important projects I took on was a special post-9/11 curriculum designed to engage students in rich debate about the most pressing topics related to our seemingly changed world. I met with Social Studies teachers from middle and high schools around the district. My formal authority allowed me to have a significant voice in how these crucial dialogues and conversations would be framed. Yet as essential questions arose, I felt how difficult it was for me to be objective. I’d objected all my life to the abuses of Wall Street. I’d objected to 270 American military bases populating the globe. I resonated in some ways with Bin Laden’s anger. I’d objected to the first Gulf War. As suggested in the Dateline video about the Saud family, I felt America had “struck a deal with the devil” over oil in the early part of the 20th century. Many of my attempts to escape the gravitational force of my own childhood and teen narratives were in vain; the black hole usually pulled me back in. Try as I might, it was difficult to keep the “work at the center” when *so* *far to the Left*.

Ten years later, I have a new perspective on how I might have been a more effective leadership as head of Social Studies curriculum. Over many years of continuing to work in education leadership and attending education courses at the Harvard School of Education and leadership courses at the Kennedy School of Government, I’ve gained insight about adaptive leadership and how to more effectively lead across a variety of complex and fragile boundaries. I’m closer to being a leader who has the complexity of mind to hold many seemingly contradictory perspectives at once. Forging a successful bridge or two between my parents as a youth was only one of many necessary steps on the road to real leadership; to thrive as a leader, I need to be able to conceptualize a complex set of intertwining and interconnected bridges. Like Manhattan, a location joined by many bridges that bring cars, subway trains, bikes, and people onto the island, I need to think and operate with increasing complexity. Real transformative and effective education leaders and change agents must create a holding environment with hundreds of “bridges” to effectively deal with the multiple complex challenges within educational contexts. They must conceptualize complex bridges not *only* with respect to their *own* district, but also to nearby district, the entire state, and the country. Real leaders have access to seeing their own narratives as *nested within* a broader sets of multiple narratives. Effective leaders need to, in the face of crises like 9/11, see “through the fog” (or the debris at Ground Zero as the horrific case may be). They must be able to see through the fog of fear and the fog of war so as to address deeper underlying issues.

The American public education system is a case of democracy out of control (Williams, class). While public education is a federal system, states and cities have a lot of say in many factors like budgets. So many checks and balances are in place that districts often can’t respond quickly enough to deal with pressing problems. On one level of abstraction, all narratives within education are valid and each is entitled to they say. On another level, time is often wasted when the talking stick is passed to all. An effective leader stands in the midst of the narratives, sees their validity of all, and takes a educated, wise stand on what is need to attain progress. A real leader helps create a district that is a safe place to express all views while artfully steering away from the kind of narratives that result in work avoidance. A real leader deeply honors the views of each member of the community while also holding them accountable to a generally agreed upon standard for of what constitutes improvement and what results in teaching and learning. Real leaders in education build trust by telling teachers they *want to know how* to support them, and really meaning those words. A truly effective leader would have, in the weeks after 9/11, search the world for the best practices on how to navigate and lead through that particular type of crisis. A real leader sets up leadership practice communities to collaborate on focusing on the work at the center and exploring solutions to the most demanding education problems. An effective education leader needs to do what I mostly failed at ten years ago: they need to be an unstoppable stand to get teachers and students truly talking to each other in real and productive ways. Leaders need to get students thinking rigorously about the limits of their own narratives. *Literacy* is distinction of language that is seen within education as a powerful that influences every other discipline. Perhaps the distinction of narrative is just as powerful an interdisciplinary tool for educators.

Effective leaders recognize the golden opportunities to change our paradigm with respect to how we think about and deal with the notion of *difference*. Real education leaders bring attention to how schools and districts unnecessarily compete with each other while not holding a perspective wide enough to see and understand the long-term destructiveness of this competition. An education leader must help his district see the broader education picture. They need to see that, especially in America, our distrusting collective egos tend to tear each other down while reinforcing even more distrust. They must cultivate skills in how to motivate other education leaders to see the larger context of this paradox of trust, and reverse the vicious cycle. When events like 9/11 occur, leaders must use their authority to apply adaptive leadership in such a way that they identify the wonderful opportunities for the entire district to capitalize on *adaptive opportunities.* To frame it in the context of narratives, leaders must spearhead progress with respect to building the capacity for *adaptive narrating.*

What would this have looked like specifically for me if I’d been more adept at adaptive narrating? I’d have found a way to get Social Studies teachers excited about meeting up together—perhaps in professional development learning salons—to share their controversial curriculum with each other and have rigorous talks about what effectively addressed the deepest challenges and what did not. I’d have motivated them to share soon after trying a lesson how they might improve it and then hand it off to a fellow teacher at the same school or a different school in the district. I’d have helped teachers to notice their habits of keeping their own great curriculum ideas “close to their chest” like poker players do with their playing cards. I’d orchestrate learning around building awareness of how stingy teachers and heads of department can be with their curriculum and data, out of the perceived need to compete for resources and gain praise from those who are their closest authority figures. Like those rare authors who are “masters of narrative,” I’d employ my capacities to build cultural bridges within school districts, both in terms of the Social Studies curriculum and in terms of the real lives of my colleagues in the district. These cross-cultural events would invite the sharing of traditions while also dissolving unnecessarily obstructive cultural boundaries. I’d help orchestrate the process of orienting instruction around building bridges in the school where they were needed. In the face of the events surrounding 9/11, I’d encourage all the educators within my realm of authority to participate in professional development book salons around the thoughtful works of authors like Hofstedte, who distinguish essential cultural dimensions. In this case I’d have my team of teachers work with the dimensions related to political ideology and narrative. I’d do the inner work necessary to be aware of the constraints of my *own* narrative so that I could orchestrate learning about the complex nature of such narratives and their impact on how we approach our professions and operate in the world.

If I’d been the leader ten years ago that I think I could be today, I’d truly know what it meant to create a holding environment for my fellow suffering staff. I’d have recognized that under the surface of the hostility and fear was the need of so many in the district to figuratively (and for many literally!) *be held*. I’d have been familiar with the size of this holding environment, the optimal level of heat to build motivation, and the optimal pace at which to “stir” the holding environment. I’d have taken on the incredibly creative challenge of being a “narration alchemist,” raising the heat just high enough to separate out the “layers of narrative metal” so as to gain insight into *how the narratives took form in the first place*. And within that alchemic wisdom, armed with a newly “strengthened metal,” I’d design a complex and adaptable bridges strong enough to hold the real and imagined differences between conservative and liberal viewpoints.I’d fiercely protect the “learning space” so as to glean as much wisdom as possible about all pieces of reality as it pertains to the narrative challenge. I’d ask those around me who I thought had good judgment, *both liberal and conservative*, to actively call attention to my potential blind spots. Knowing to the core of my bones that no one authority had all the answers, I’d have creatively partnered with certain members of my district on both sides of the political aisle.

If I’d been the leader ten years ago that I think I could be today, I’d have taken the more fundamentalist residue of my political perspective *out of the way*. I’d have worked more to dissolve my righteousness. I’d have shared the realizations from this paper to all my colleagues, perhaps adding to their hunger to *see their own blind spots*. I’d address my own “inner work” while at the same time taking on the “outer work” of the district. I’d have more effectively left behind that which was not useful from my narrative and cultural DNA while attempting to keep the best. From my mom’s DNA I’d remember the very best of her “psycho-babble” about the importance of striving for one’s “highest self” while inspiring others to strive for their highest selves, too.

If I could do it again, I’d be a leader in exploring with my whole district the ways in which fundamentalist political narratives and clinging to an ideology is, at the heart of the matter, related to perceived fears of economic and status loss in the face of great uncertainty. I’d remember our humanity. Gandhi once asked a Hindu man, riddled with guilt after killing a Muslim boy, to go forth, adopt a Muslim boy, and raise him as if he were his own. I’d remember the nobleness of my dad’s magical, wide-eyed stories about how Gandhi cleaned the toilets of the prisons. I’d remember the story mentioned in class about the Japanese Kagiyama who cleaned the toilets with his janitorial staff.

If I could go back—if I could do it again—I’d be such a stand for the transformation of my district that even in the context of low morale I would—hopefully with the high spirit and humor of Weary Dunlop—suggest that we all clean the classrooms and sinks of the teachers whose political narratives we most adamantly dislike and oppose.

And I’d try to remember that even the thinnest piece of paper has two sides.