Character and . . .
Transitions

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The faculty essays presented here emerge from a semester-long process of reading and writing together in an environment of critique and review. Nevertheless, this invited journal of essays represents the authors' views and not necessarily the views of the Wendt Center for Character Education or the University of Dubuque.

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Character and Transitions

Annalee R. Ward

Off to college. A move to a new place. Marriage or relationship changes. A new job or a job loss, retirement, illness or death. These are a few of what Bruce Feiler calls "lifequakes," which we often think of when we think about transitions (79). But the reality of our lives includes so many more "disruptors" (71). We soon realize that our lives require us to walk through numerous transitions moving from this status to that status, from this way of life to that way of life, from the old to the new.[1]

Transitions are commonplace occurrences in individual lives. "The life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another," argues Arnold Van Gennep, an early scholar of transitions (2-3). He continues:

> For groups, as well as for individuals, life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and rest, and then to begin acting again, but in a different way. And there are always new thresholds to cross. . . . (189)

To be human is to face change, to encounter loss, and to move onward.

Transitions also occur on a larger social scale—organizational changes (think of how technology changes functions and sometimes purposes of organizations), institutional transitions (consider new definitions of marriage), national turnovers (witness the Taliban retaking Afghanistan) or even transitions on a world-wide scale (think about climate change).

To be human is to face change, to encounter loss, and to move onward.

This issue of *Character and . . .* uses the theme of Transitions to address very different situations from the personal to the organizational to the world-wide. Jeff Haverland navigates the pain of a son leaving home and moving to

college. Jim Romagna examines some of the ways transitions happen in sport and the use of rituals to grow through those transitions. Ann Mauss explores the moral consequences of our increasing dependence on computer decision-making through algorithms. Mary Emily Duba steps back to call us to truth-telling in a world transitioning to post-truth. The issue concludes with a response essay from Rick Olsen who brings a model of Community Resilience to his understanding of these essays. This diversity of topics began, however, in common readings and discussions about the nature of transitions. I'd like to highlight a few of the things we took away from our readings and discussions by describing the nature of a transition before introducing the individual essays.

Transitions

Whether we find them in a remote tribe studied by anthropologists and ethnographers, in scholars' applications to various disciplines, or in self-help books which help navigate life, transitions continue to be of concern for human thriving. The work of Arnold Van Gennep followed by that of Victor Turner laid the groundwork for understanding that transitions encompass three phases and often employ rituals to move forward to a state of transformation.

Our lives require us to transition from the old to the new.

With their anthropological and ethnographic work, we have seen how various cultures practice rituals and rites of passage as a means of moving children to adults, for example. The transitional process begins with some interruption to everyday life. It may include specific rituals in which everyday practices and norms do not apply and ultimately culminates in a new or different way of being.

In Van Gennep's language, the three phases of transition include separation, margin, and aggregation (Turner, *Ritual* 94). The margin state, also referred to as liminality, particularly in the scholarship of Victor Turner, constitutes the disorientation of living "betwixt and between" (*Ritual* 95). Much of these scholars' work focuses on the power of rituals and rites of passage, enacted in that liminal, middle state, to act as a catalyst for the change that occurs when one moves to the third phase. Crossing the threshold or limen into the disorienting margin state, according to Turner, creates a loosening

or suspending of norms that typically have bound one's life (*Dramas* 13-14). At this time social rules and structures may be questioned and possibly even ignored. Liminality provides a space for creativity and community of fellow transitioners. These bonds may be temporary but also might provide support at a time of stress.

The language referring to these three parts has been modernized and applied particularly to individuals in William Bridges' work, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*. He sets up a contrast between change as situational and transition as psychological (xiii). Building on Van Gennep and Turner's work, he too identifies three parts to a transition but labels them as follows: "1) an ending, 2) a neutral zone, and 3) a new beginning" (4). Bridges believes the transition is a linear process. One must go through an ending and neutral zone before the new beginning (18).

Transition Phases			
Van Gennep/Turner	Separation	Margin/Liminal	Aggregation
Bridges	Ending	Neutral Zone	New Beginning
Feiler	Long Goodbye	Messy Middle	New Beginning

A more recent work by Bruce Feiler, *Life Is in the Transitions: Mastering Change at Any Age*, expands Bridges' work. Feiler interviewed over 250 individuals and coded their stories. He emphatically argues that transitions are not neat linear experiences (310-11). People might start a transition in the three phases differently and may circle back to a stage they've been in before, but they gravitate to the places that they are most able to manage. The three stages are similar to what others have identified, but Feiler speaks of "the long goodbye, the messy middle, or the new beginning" (311).

When we put moral character in conversation with transitions, we often speak of necessary virtues such as courage, perseverance, and gratitude. Key to the conversation of working through a transition with character is the practice of reflection. The looking back and looking forward brings perspective and can move us in positive directions. This practice is complicated, however, by technology that enables constant connection and can prevent endings/goodbyes, thus interfering with the

> *Key to the conversation of working through a transition with character is the practice of reflection.*

transition. Without goodbyes, the growth into something new is stymied. Consider the metaphor of entering a long tunnel—something a transition can feel like. When we can't see the other side, the darkness is disorienting and disturbing. If we choose to keep looking back at the entrance, we don't come through the tunnel. We don't grow or change. Character matters in making transitions transformative experiences.

A transition can feel like a long tunnel.

Journal Essays

Jeff Haverland's deeply personal essay, "Life in Transition: Using Reflection and Gratitude to Discover Hope, Optimism, and Resilience," endeavors to help us understand the nature of that in-between time in a transition called liminality, particularly at the individual level. By working through his own challenges with a transition he reminds us all of the need for practices of thoughtful reflection and gratitude. These practices fuel hope and build resilience. Being active in allowing the pain of the transition to form us contributes to growth. While transitions are often very difficult and involve loss and change, coming through them can lead one to a place of greater strength couched in the humility of having worked through something difficult.

Rituals emerge as valuable coping tools employed in the messy middle state of liminality. In many traditional cultures, we see them as rites of passage. Jim Romagna, in "Ritual in Sports: Transition and Transformation," considers the role of rituals at the organizational level in the culture of organized sports. He examines three rituals implemented by coaches to help their teams navigate transitions well and makes suggestions for coaches and athletes as they develop rituals to promote character growth with their own teams.

Rituals used in organizations enable both reflection and forward movement. Respondent Rick Olsen comments:

> Ritual provides the symbolic space for transformation, and is often the act that formally changes someone from a teammate to a captain or from a groom to a husband. But it does not make them an effective captain or a good husband. The ritual is the symbolic catalyst for such

transformation. It gives permission to the self to embrace the new identity more easily and more fully. (76)

Symbolic practices such as rituals and rites of passage function as anchors during the disorientating time of being "betwixt and between."

These essays focused on individual and organizational examples of transition. Ann Mauss' essay, "Stepping over the Brink into Artificial Intelligence," moves to broader cultural considerations when she questions our growing practices of ceding decision-making to computer algorithms inherent in Artificial Intelligence (A.I.). This transition from individual input to programmed judgments raises numerous concerns about character and ethics.

Transitioning to computer-based decisions raises character concerns.

Whether A.I. is advising judges on sentencing, providing traveling directions, or "only" making purchasing suggestions, the motivations behind what A.I. was taught and the ethics and values inherent in it ought to be of concern to us.

Now consider if the data input is coded with layers of cultural assumptions as well. A National Public Radio story describes the prolific hacking of our computer data by countries like China. The author points out that they are indiscriminate in collecting data, using a "vacuum" approach in order to have a lot of data with which to train the AI.

> The reason we should care about that is because of the role AI plays in our everyday lives. It is becoming the mechanism by which insurance rates are calculated, credit is given, mortgages are approved and health care data is calculated. . . . As it builds out its AI, China can social engineer to its priorities, to its mission, she [Kiersten E. Todt Managing Director, The Cyber Readiness Institute] said. And that mission may be different from ours. (Temple-Raston)

A.I. algorithms require lots of data. If the data collectors are not concerned about character and ethics, those who depend on the algorithms can easily be manipulated. Info can be skewed or distorted to create false realities.

"Does the Truth Matter? Truth-Telling as Resistance and Hope in a Post-Truth Era" by Mary Emily Duba engages a meta or big picture perspective

on what is being claimed as a transition to a world of post-truth, a world where truth is not the norm or the expectation. The political realm brought this perspective to the forefront. For example, opinion writer Paul Krugman notes, "Whatever the explanation, post-truth politics has expanded its domain to the point that it overrides everyday experience."

We cannot survive long if we do not commit to truth-telling. As Duba points out, we are facing global crises that can only be tackled if we agree to face them with truth.

Rather than accepting a transition to a post-truth world, Duba argues that commitment to truth-telling as a relational practice acts as faithful resistance to the cynicism and distrust that ensue from lies and falsehoods. By telling the truth, we are willing the good of others, the common good, she argues. In this practice, we abandon even the possibility

Global crises demand truth.

of transitioning to post-truth and live out of the hope expressed by Jewish and Christian prophets that we will someday walk together in the peace of "shared reality." To that end, Duba makes several practical suggestions that each of us could begin now to counter the forces of "post-truth."

The final article, "Navigating Transitions with Intention and Resilience," by respondent Rick Olsen, weaves these essays together by highlighting definitions and themes. Using the theoretical model of Community Resiliency, he challenges us to harness the power of communication to ask good questions, particularly during times of uncertainty.

The essays in this journal represent a semester of reading, talking, and writing about ideas that captivate us and shape our past, present, and

Transitions should be times of growth and discovery.

future. Whether we experience transitions individually, organizationally, or globally, understanding the pain of endings, the disorientation of being between the past and the future, and the discovery of the change emerging, we hope you will find resources here to encourage and aid you on your journeys. May your transitions become times of growth and discoveries of new possibilities.

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Notes

[1] Feiler estimates that on average adults will experience "between thirty and forty" "disruptors" or one every twelve to eighteen months (71-72).

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Life in Transition: Using Reflection and Gratitude to Discover Hope, Optimism, and Resilience

Jeffrey A. Haverland

Abstract

Humans are not immune to the challenges of uncertainty, transition, and liminality—the space leading up to a transition, but we have it within us to persevere. How we navigate liminal space is deeply personal, and even the emotionally strongest individuals must find ways to demonstrate resilience in order to successfully transition to a new normal. Reflection and gratitude, valuable tools for developing resilience, force us to pause and find clarity in real time. However, both require ongoing practice. As we seek to find our happy endings, we must realize that fairy tales are merely tales, and we should strive for happier endings, which emerge when we practice reflection and gratitude to grow optimism, hope, and ultimately resilience.

I'm Trying My Best to Be Okay[1, 2]

Dear Jack,

I am trying my best, but I miss you. After we dropped you off, I cried all the way home. The next day, I cried when I saw your closed door. I cried when I opened the dishwasher. My heart hurts so badly, and I feel broken. I cry as if I have lost everything, and I feel so ashamed that I am not stronger. When I was a new dad, they told me life would be chaotic, crazy, and fast; and I worried about everything— except for the day you would grow up and leave—that was just way

too far off, until now. I know you are going to be busy with your new life, and I won't fault you for needing to rearrange your priorities, even though selfishly this will sting a bit. Just remember that the door is always open, and I am here for you. As one of your greatest fans, I'm so proud of you! Don't worry that I am sad. I am grateful for all you have brought to my life, and I will find my way through this. I just need some time.

Love, Dad

I find myself in a period of uncertainty and am struggling with what should be an "ordinary" (A. Brooks) and expected transition that began when, like millions of other people in this world, my son grew up and left home. However, I feel devastated. The truth is that for 18 years, my identity has been hopelessly entwined with his and without this piece of my life intact, I find myself needing to redefine who I am. Without my son here, life is different, and I fear the uncertainty. I am in a different space where I must reconcile my past self with my current reality and navigate this unfamiliar liminal space of a major transition.

Like any stubborn human, my initial reaction to this change—and countless others—is heavy with despair as I fight against a shifting normal. I just want to go back to contentment with a life I loved, but this is impossible, and I must move in a new direction. Where do I begin? More importantly, where do we all begin? Let's start by realizing that, to a large extent, we are responsible for what happens next in our lives (Frankl et al.) and that our decisions influence our experiences, determining whether our outcomes will be positive, negative, or neutral. This means that we need strategies to manage liminality in our lives.

> *I must reconcile my past self with my current reality and navigate this unfamiliar space of a major transition.*

Living in liminal space, we can use reflection and gratitude to grow resilience. It is important to become more aware of our emotional needs so we can best position ourselves to overcome struggles in our lives. By understanding that we can fully govern only ourselves, we become more aware of our needs through personal reflection and gratitude and lay the foundation for resilience. However, before any of this can happen, let's consider liminality and what it means for each of us.

I Pointed to the Sky and Now You Want to Fly[3]

Dear Dad,

I don't like talking about leaving and being gone because then it becomes real. I can't hide away and pretend that nothing is changing or nothing is different. . . . I love you and Mom and Anna so much and don't you guys ever forget that. No matter how far away I feel, I am only an hour away. You are always welcome to come for lunch dates or just to hang out.

Love, Jack
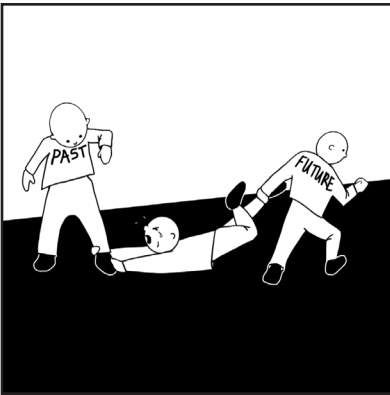
Discomfort in liminal space

Life moves fast and sometimes we just need a little more time to live in the comfort of our current normal as there is discomfort in liminal space—the uncertain space of a transition. Although liminality is universal, predictable, and repeatable (A. Brooks), the causes of our liminal states are deeply personal and our reactions to them tend to be highly subjective. Therefore, it makes sense that similar experiences resonate differently from one person to another, although we can tease out common threads among humankind. The first commonality is our susceptibility to uncertainty and potential loneliness brought on by disruptions in our lives (Robbins). The second is the universal process by which we experience liminality.

Liminality requires us to understand the processes of separation and margin that arise as we confront and reassess our vision of normal (Van Gennep as cited in Feiler 61-62). Defining normalcy calls us to embrace our liminal reality and suffer purposefully. While it is a difficult proposition to view suffering as a positive experience, it encourages the vulnerability necessary to separate from our past and be receptive to the good that can come from living in marginal or liminal space. It is at this threshold—between what we knew and what we are coming to know—where we experience the transformative power of liminality and realize how our identity is often defined by the time we spend in liminal moments.

We spend an inordinate amount of our lives seeking *normal* in an undefined space, but what if the normal state we seek no longer exists? Left in the

limen, we must find value in our discomfort so that we can move toward a new state of being. At the very least, liminal living shapes our character by leaving us with what David Brooks refers to as a residue on our soul (13). It is this residue, building up over time, that serves to illuminate a profound truth that our ultimate transition may come into fruition so slowly and invisibly that we may not notice it until we have no other option but to accept it (Bridges and Bridges 27). That is, we may already be crossing through the limen and unable to turn back.

It is possible that liminality would be more tolerable if we could control the events shaping our lives. When these events are beyond our control (as most are), they can lead to moments of disequilibrium, pain, and distress (A. Brooks). This can be seen in the most extreme circumstance of physical death where a severe and irreversible transition becomes the most profound example of loss. But what about a less extreme case of love and loss in our lives like losing a job or ending a relationship? Love and loss still interact, but unlike physical death, there is continued hope for rebirth after a symbolic death (Gignoux as cited in Bussalari and Goodell 103). As we embrace change and purposefully engage with suffering, we have an opportunity to be born anew. However, rebirth offers little solace amid uncertainty—even less in moments of calm and peace because we know nothing can last forever and loss is inevitable. Though this may be discouraging, if we seek to avoid suffering, we risk losing the emotional unfolding of our lives.

The impact of loss is profoundly different for each of us—even when confronting similar situations—and our reactions to it can call our character into question. For example, is it acceptable to grieve the loss of a pet in the same way our friend grieves the loss of their parent? Is it okay for our

> *If we seek to avoid suffering, we risk losing the emotional unfolding of our lives.*

loss to pale in comparison with the loss others are facing? Can loss impact us in a way that seems incongruent with societal norms? The answer to each of these questions is *yes*. Loss is rooted in love and, as Brené Brown notes, love is uncertain and risky and leaves us emotionally exposed (*Daring* 34). It appears that loss and love share a common footprint in that love makes us vulnerable, vulnerability makes us susceptible to loss, and the threat of eventual loss causes us to fear liminal uncertainty. Is the love we can experience worth the pain that may accompany eventual loss? This question can be asked of relationships, jobs, and countless other experiences in our lives. In fact, the potential for loss is often how we judge the importance

of someone or something. Whether negative or positive, liminality is punctuated with some degree of loss.

So, how do we convince ourselves that our liminal struggle will be worth it in the end? Liminal experiences may bring uncertainty, discomfort, and even pain. Our goal must be to find peace amid the limen when the path is naturally uncertain, uncharted, and defined in the moment (Chödrön 205). To do this, we need to stop running from discomfort[4] and look for opportunities to reflect and be grateful for what we already have. It may be that in these chaotic moments we find pathways to resilience as we reflect on how far we've come and generate gratitude from our vulnerability (Brown, *Gifts* 82).

It Wasn't So Long Ago We Walked Together and You Held My Hand[5]

Dear Jack,

Well, Mom talked me into reading your letter the day you went back. I struggled through it but thought I was okay. Ten minutes later, I just sobbed. This may sound dumb, but it is in these moments where I am just so amazed by how you have changed my life in ways I could never imagine. It's rough getting old, and I realize that I cannot hang onto you the way I used to . . . though I still want to. Remember this when you have kids someday. It seems like you have all the time in the world, yet this is only a half-truth because the days may seem long, but the years strike like lightning (fast and never again).[6] You are one good human—even though you procrastinate on sending emails.

Love You, Dad

There is something profound about our human ability to reflect on situations and find greater meaning.[7] Reflection can provide us with direction as we come to understand how moments, people, or things shape the trajectory of our lives and define our character as we find our footing amid the limen. This is because reflection affords us a unique opportunity to consider our lives formatively. If we can learn to use formative data to make purposeful decisions, we can be more strategic about our growth and consequently more reflective.

Reflection calls us to be consequential thinkers who are keenly aware of the positive and negative repercussions of our actions, and yet this can only happen when we purposefully recognize that "we can make our own choices

and decide what brings us peace" (Feiler 62). This recognition reminds us that the only thing we can control is our own behavior and that when we choose to remain in a state of disarray, we fail to acknowledge our personal responsibility to ourselves and others. To find our way through the limen, we must be able and willing to introspectively step back and see who and what we are at any given moment. Reflection affords us the opportunity to learn—albeit not always comfortably—from life in real time. It allows us to see where we have been, to marvel in the experiences we have had, and to envision a future that is hopeful—even when the present is not.

Reflection makes us aware of how our thoughts, feelings, and emotions can drastically color our circumstances. It is okay to be angry, sad, happy, even bewildered, disgusted, or frustrated, but to what end? We should try to purposefully reflect upon our circumstances and find greater meaning for ourselves and others, learning to see our lives within the novel context where the only way to go is forward. This requires us to recognize an altered, uncomfortable, or painful reality where we acknowledge our loss and begin to move on.
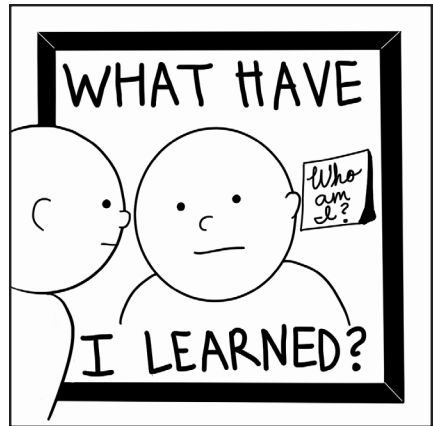
Reflection

The beginning and ending of life are beyond our control. Yet between these two extremes we have countless opportunities to come to know ourselves better, with none so important as those that make us struggle. Even when it is painful, reflection helps us make sense of our circumstances. Don't get me wrong, reflection is difficult when we are under emotional distress (Healy 115). In fact, we may find ourselves overwhelmed and unwilling to reflect, but it is in these vulnerable moments—although potentially disorienting—where we can experience vibrant periods of exploration and reconnection (Van Gennep as cited in Feiler 143). This is where reflection—punctuated by realism (Healy 124)—can provide moments of clarity as we reorient ourselves in newly defined space.

Successfully maneuvering in both good times and bad calls for ongoing reflection. When we allow reflection to be formative, it becomes a worthy task that allows us to experience gratitude.

> *Dear Dad,*
>
> *I remember lying in bed one weekend and just crying, thinking that nothing will ever be what it used to be. That is the truth though—nothing will ever go back exactly to the way it was and I had to learn to be okay with that.*
>
> *Love, Jack*

Somedays, We Can't See the Joy That Surrounds Us[8]

> *Dear Jack,*
>
> *I am just curious—what have you become more grateful for since you left for school last fall? I hope you are having a great day!*
>
> *Love, Dad*

If we pause long enough to force our eyes open—to look around—we have the chance to see the good in our lives and to allow gratitude to emerge. Life is not perfect, and we often get lost in trying to make it so. The truth is that beauty is everywhere, but it often takes more than a cursory glance to see it. Are we ready to see it? If we see it, how will we allow it to change us? Will we be grateful for its impact in our lives?

Gratitude serves to empower us when we are honest about who we are and what we need. It acts as a conduit to further define our identity and character by allowing us to see past our liminal circumstances. But this requires a shift in our mindset and an acknowledgment of the abundance in our lives even when we are unsatisfied. When life is good, we are content. When life is hard, we notice discrepancies. It is here that we struggle to find happiness in our circumstances, and it is here where many of us need to do a better job of acknowledging the gifts we have. Consider this: "If the opposite of scarcity is enough, then practicing gratitude is how we acknowledge that there's enough and that we're enough" (Brown, *Daring* 124). Standing vulnerable in an uncomfortable space, we learn to embrace the abundance around us.

Gratitude

To express gratitude—in the right way, to the right people, for the right things (Aristotle)—is to exemplify the greatest virtue (Cicero ch. 33, sec. 80). In this sense, gratitude has the potential to become deeply rooted in our character. Gratitude is important as it is a strong and frequent human emotion (McCullough et al.) benefiting both the giver and the receiver, but it must be regularly practiced for it is "a little like faith without works—it's not alive" (Brown, *Daring* 79). Let's bring gratitude to life.

We best practice gratitude when we do so spontaneously and continuously through heartfelt recognition of a positive contribution to our lives. As we do this, it is important to take inventory of how we make other people feel and how our actions make us feel. It helps to pay attention to how our expressions of gratitude ground us and at the same time offer levity following an action that is natural, sincere, and validating.

We have been taught from a very young age to show gratitude. *Please*, *thank you*, holding a door, and gift giving are common expressions of gratitude. Although this type of gratitude is meaningful and important, it has the power to be so much more. When practicing gratitude, we need to imagine how it can shape our character and help those around us while disposing us to hope (Chaudhary et al.; "Grateful"), productivity, and protection by mitigating anger, loneliness, depression (Manchula and Patra 37), unhappiness, helplessness, and hopelessness (Gilbert 21). Gratitude offers vitality, happiness, physical health, optimism, less stress, fewer episodes of clinical depression (Easterbrook 238-239), and paves the way for beneficial outcomes like creativity, knowledge, resilience, social integration, and health (Emmons and McCullough 53). But it won't happen without effort, without purposefully finding ways to make room for gratitude in our lives.

Gratitude allows us to thrive in adverse conditions (Gupta and Kumar 191) by providing us with a reserve of resources that we can draw from in our times of need (Emmons and McCullough 152). Gratitude is transformational, but it cannot only exist in good times. "A grateful heart must . . . be grounded

This cyclical relationship between gratitude and reflection is at the heart of resilience.

in a general view of life that sees existence itself as a gift and anything after that—including what is difficult and even disastrous—as a potential blessing" ("Grateful"). If we see life as a blessing, we can more easily reflect on our gifts.

Even amid our darkest liminal moments, gratitude will illuminate the blessings in our lives. Through gratitude, we have hope of uttering appreciation contrary to the circumstances in our lives and finding joy in unintended places. If we don't practice gratitude and allow ourselves to know joy, we are otherwise missing out on the two things that will sustain us during inevitably hard times (Brown, *Gifts* 82). Gratitude sounds simple, but to do it well we must come to know ourselves better through reflection so that we have perspective.

As we pause long enough to be grateful, we can find opportunities for deeper reflection, which can further spur gratitude. This cyclical relationship between gratitude and reflection is at the heart of resilience because it fuels optimism and hope, both essential elements if we are to find our way through and eventually out of the limen.

> *Dear Dad,*
>
> *I've become more grateful for time. I mean that no matter how long I get to do something, at least I get to do it. Whether that means time to come home or playing time in soccer, I have become more grateful that I'm getting the opportunity to do so.*
>
> *Love, Jack*

But You'll Be Alright on the First Night When I'm Gone[9]

> *Dear Dad,*
>
> *I will not lie—I miss you too. At first, I thought it was super easy (the transition and all). I started to really miss everything and everyone after about a month. You know that you will always have to yell for me to do the dishes (that probably won't ever change). I know that you will always be my Dad and you know that I will always be your Jackie. Remember, if you're feeling sad, I am only a phone call away.*
>
> *Love, Jack*

Even in our lowest moments, life will call, and we need to be willing to hear it. Eventual pain may be a cost of happiness and love, but that should not deter us from pursuing either. Often it is pain that shows us the depth of our love and reminds us of how someone or something marked our soul. Suffering and coming to understand our pain, we learn that we can stay the course, overcome our challenges, and move forward optimistically.

Optimism ignites resilience by energizing us with a creative approach to coping with challenging situations (Southwick and Charney 35) and helps "carry us through the doubt and fear" (Brown, *Gifts* 66). When we are optimistic and hopeful, we can find joy, gratitude, and grace (Brown, *Gifts* 73); we can find the strength to continue forward.

Resilience is not a quid pro quo tradeoff that allows us to choose to give up our personal dreams and thereby avoid suffering. As we become more resilient, we are better able to acknowledge our suffering, learn from it, and willfully move past it. There is a powerful truth in looking back and understanding how the lowest moments of our lives were not as low or insurmountable as we once believed. Through these moments, we became resilient because we found optimism, and we had hope.

Resilient people find ways to persevere and grow through the liminal uncertainty that accompanies loss—physical or emotional. Resilience comes when we recognize the relationship between happiness and eventual loss, where the pain of loss is vastly outweighed by the joy brought by the object of our grief. For those who love, loss is inevitable, but love gives us hope that the darkness will eventually pass. Hope is our greatest source of resilience and a direct consequence of reflection and gratitude.
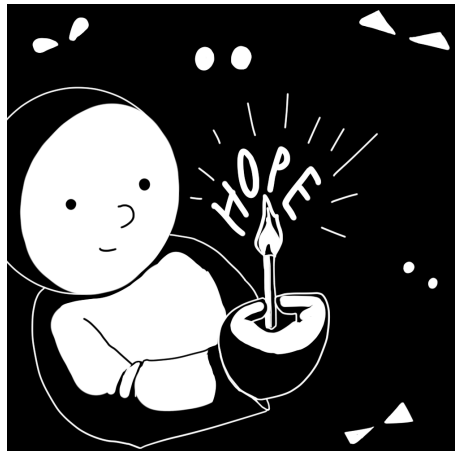
Hope

We can start by learning to express gratitude for those who support us when we suffer and protect us when we are vulnerable. The hopeful outcome of any situation is that we navigate the limen in order to find a better way to live (Buzzanel 9; Skar 259) by coming to terms with loss (Boerner and Jopp 171) and recognizing the beneficial outcomes that arise from major disruptions in our lives (Masten 228). Until we can fully realize the meaning behind our liminal moments, our lives may stall, and even though this may offer momentary stability, it does nothing for our long-term survival. After all, "Life is in the transitions. We can't ignore these central times of life; we can't wish or will them away. We have to accept them, name them, mark

them, share them, and eventually convert them into fuel for remaking our life stories" (Feiler 81).

No matter what life throws at us, we can learn to stay the course and realize that even the happy endings of fairy tales require sacrifice and struggle (Feiler 81). When life presents hardship and misfortune, resilient people overcome circumstances to be extraordinary—even if only for themselves. Our ability to be

> *Optimism ignites resilience by energizing us with a creative approach to coping with challenging situations.*

strong and overcome obstacles empowers us—this is how resilient people survive and thrive (Jay 302-303). Without the suffering, without the fall, without the uncertainty, without an opportunity to reflect and be grateful, we cannot rise. To this end, I encourage you to:

- Embrace liminal experiences—even when they hurt or seem unfair. It is in these moments that our character is shaped.
- Be vulnerable. Come to know uncertainty as a conduit for new experiences.
- Value love over potential loss and be open to evolving relationships.
- Reflect often and find value in the space where you reside.
- Practice gratitude.
- Accept that some things are beyond your control and gain power in that thinking.
- Use reflection and gratitude to build resilience.
- Be grounded but hopeful and openly share hope with others.
- Forget the fairy tales and mythical happy endings and use resilience to navigate life and find your happier ending.
- When holding your breath is safer than breathing[10] . . . breathe deeply!

I Will Rise a Thousand Times Again[11]

Dear Jack,

It took some distance for me to realize how incredibly thankful I am for who you are and what you have done for my life. I still miss you like crazy, but my heart hurts a bit less now. I know you are going to

be okay because you have shown me that you are going to be okay. I think I am starting to get the hang of this. I may still find myself sad from time to time, but that's love for you! I'm still here if you need me, but we've got this!

Love, Dad

Resilience fuels our desire to push on despite uncertainty because history shows us we can overcome our suffering. Being resilient is considered a mark of great character and happens best when we learn to show gratitude despite our circumstances while using reflection to gain a purposeful vantage. Reflection and gratitude make way for joy as joy is found "when we are grateful for what we have; and when we don't squander moments. Experiencing joy allows us to build resilience, and to cultivate hope" (Brown, *Daring* 125-126). Hope is what fuels us when all else may have failed us.

Embrace liminal experiences—even when they hurt or seem unfair. It is in these moments that our character is shaped.

At some point in our lives, we all hit bottom and must fight to reach the surface and breathe again (Sandberg 29). Although there is nothing wrong with yearning for a life of stability, devoid of pain, suffering, and liminal moments, it is unrealistic. There is something profound about the lessons that emerge when we realize that to fully live in the present, we can never return to what was. Our lives are marked by change, and we must prepare ourselves for liminal living. In doing so, we can become more adept at using tools such as reflection and gratitude to help us become more resilient by finding peace in the uncertainty that we all have experienced and will undoubtedly face again in the remaining years of our lives.

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Notes

[1] Anson Seabra, "Trying My Best."

[2] I will be using song titles because the music speaks personally to me, encouraging and strengthening me. Maybe it will speak to you, too.

[3] Nichole Nordeman, "Slow Down."

[4] Readers can explore issues of character and discomfort in volume 5 of this journal, *Character and . . . Discomfort.*

[5] Michael Bublé, "Forever Now."

[6] Tanya Tucker, "Bring My Flowers Now."

[7] Robert Zussman described this concept as *autobiographical occasion*, in which humans are "called on to reflect in systematic and extended ways on who we are and what we are" (Feiler).

[8] Josh Groban, "Thankful."

[9] Joey + Rory, "When I'm Gone."

[10] Sara Bareilles and John Legend, "A Safe Place to Land."

[11] Andra Day, "Rise Up."

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Ritual in Sports: Transition and Transformation

James Romagna

Abstract

Athletes and coaches at every level of sports must face transitions at some point in their careers. Rituals are powerful tools for teams navigating transitions. When chosen thoughtfully, performed honestly and sincerely, and followed with time for reflection, rituals can lead to transformation and character growth in athletes' lives even beyond their sports experience.

The locker room was white-painted cinder block with two solid red stripes circling the room, one at three feet off the ground and the other at nine feet. The paint design replicated the team's sweater. The logo spread across the athletes' chests was even embroidered in the carpet, the center piece of the room. Unlike the sweater's winged design, which had been grabbed, shoved to the boards, soaked with sweat and blood and likely even spat on (depending on their opponent that weekend), the symbol on the floor was sacred. Everyone on that team knew the logo was never to be touched by foot, skate, or stick. No matter how raucous after a victory or angry after a loss the mood in the locker room became, the logo was protected by the belief that its representation of the team had to be respected. It was sacred to those who called the locker room home.

The sacred symbol on the locker room floor

This junior hockey team was set to embark on the road to the championship. The regular season was coming to an end and, although successful, it

no longer mattered. After seven months, the season was starting over. No matter how good they were during the regular season, the playoffs presented a clean slate. The locker room held 23 players: skilled sixteen-year-olds and gritty twenty-year-olds, and between those bookends was the gamut of experience, leadership, nervousness, success, failure, ego, confidence, and lack thereof. This room had every kind of physical skill there was and a full array of mental maturity. It was time to bring it all together.

Every coach and player involved in sports, no matter the level, has been challenged by a transition. It could be as desirable as qualifying for post-season play, hoping to continue riding the wave of success to a championship, or as devastating as the death of a teammate and having to carry on through a season that has lost its significance in a time of loss. Or perhaps it is the disarray of a season that has been disrupted by COVID and no one knows what challenges the next week or even day will present. Transition is an unavoidable part of coaching and participation in sport.

Every coach and player involved in sports, no matter the level, has been challenged by a transition.

For those who have made sports a part of life, the experience of transition is not new but rarely is it comfortable. There is the nervousness as one transitions from recreational sports at the developmental youth level to the introduction of competitive sports, where scores are kept, records matter, and, for athletes who make the cut, there is pressure to earn a starting role or else become a bench player. There is the transition from high school to college. The NCAA reports that 7.4 million students participate in high school athletics, but the number shrinks to 460,000 in college, when suddenly *everyone* is good, the game is faster and more challenging, and success might not come so easily. There is the transition from a highly successful season of wins and championships to one of challenges through loss and injury. And finally, there is the transition from sports to life, when one transitions from being an athlete to being a former athlete.

All transitions are challenging but they present an opportunity for growth. I suggest that rituals can help move you through a transition to a point of transformation if you take steps of self-reflection, being honest with yourself, and examining yourself authentically. In a sports setting, these transformative practices can help a team work through transitions and encourage character development. Enabling this is the coach, who should play a vital role in establishing and observing team rituals. In exploring this,

I will look at three examples of rituals coaches have introduced that have helped teams identify what they've left behind, clarify their vision for the future, and make the leap to a new phase of life. Before exploring these examples, let us take a closer look at rituals.

The Nature of Ritual

What is ritual? Frankly, one encompassing description is elusive, though I am certain we have all heard the word, used the word, and have likely participated in a ritual. *National Geographic* journalist Tim Vernimmen points to rituals as repetitive, symbolic, and purposeful behaviors that are practiced in all cultures. In some cultures it is a definitive rite of passage, a backbone of their society, while in others it is a less ceremonial box that is checked while casually moving through life. Sociologist Robert Merton expresses the notion that ritual is a largely meaningless gesture (Goodger 219), while British anthropologist Mary Douglas states that dismissing ritual as empty gesture can be "seriously disabling" (21). I believe ritual has the power to serve as a turning point, a symbol of a transition, so let's look more closely at ritual's potential role in transformative experiences.

A 2004 study by educator and occupational therapist Ruth Segal suggests that even the most mundane routines can become rituals with symbolic meaning (507). A ritual may be a simple routine when cooking to ensure safety, a public event like a parade to strengthen community, or a prayer or symbolic act as part of a religion to preserve self. What may start as routine can become a ritual that promotes identity and belonging.

In *Ritual Solidarity and Sport*, John Goodger writes of rituals observed by athletes, regardless of team, that create a commonality across all sports, such as handshakes and award ceremonies. There is a commonality within the "sport group" but the practice of these common rituals separate the participants from the spectators. Rituals within a given team differentiate that team from another, creating a unique experience within the team. An example would be two opposing teams with differing approaches to pregame preparations. There can also be rituals within sports to define

Rituals can help move you through a transition to a point of transformation if you take steps of self-reflection, being honest with yourself, and examining yourself authentically.

levels or status, such as belt rank in martial arts, or the recognition of the 1,000 point club in basketball. Goodger credits such rituals as a way for a team to express "both its single identity and its internal differentiations" (220). Ritual can be a powerful tool to establish and reinforce identity.

French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep is more pointed in his recognition of the initiation rite, one type of ritual performed as a ceremony, as a purposeful way to change one's identity, i.e., to transform. Van Gennep believes that all rites of passage have three phases: separation, margin, and aggregation (Turner, "Liminality" 360), which can also be traced through sports

Commemorating a first NHL goal

rituals of transition and transformation. Championship teams celebrate with ring ceremonies and victory parades. They commemorate first goals by keeping the ball or puck and inscribing the date and opponent on it as a visual reminder. Teams play certain warm-up songs; others conquer particular hills in their final summer workouts. Some rituals are public, some are private. Either way, for those who participate in a ritual, it has meaning—meaning for the sport, the team, and the individual. Some of these acts are simple ceremonies while others are detailed rituals. Both carry meaning, providing a way for an athlete or a team to transition to whatever might be next for them.

In the team sports setting, Van Gennep's "separation" can be interpreted as the movement from what "was" to what "is"; whether this means transitioning from regular season to post season or leaving behind old habits for a new way of doing things, it signifies embarking on a new journey. The "margin," or liminal space, is that time of reflection, digestion, making sense of what was and what is to come. It can be a subtle or monumental moment of reshaping, redefining what was. This powerful moment of "where do I go from here?" or "what's next?" is a crucial moment in an athlete's career and life. "Aggregation," the third phase, follows as the "new" athlete assimilates into the team setting, impacting the team wholly.

Following are the accounts of three teams and their specific ritual, created and introduced by the coach to be practiced by the team in that particular season. Could the ritual be adopted and implemented by other teams? Certainly. Would it have the same level of impact? That can be argued. The following three rituals were unique to these teams and all three

teams experienced the pinnacle of their sport, but more important than the seasonal success was the humility, gratitude, and compassion realized through each ritual.

Rituals for Transition

The Hotseat   The junior hockey team's "hotseat" was a cheap plastic black folding chair that looked like it would crumple under the weight of these junior hockey athletes. It did not. Positioned right at the bottom of the carpeted logo, there was just enough room left for the players to rest their feet as they awaited critique from their teammates and coaches. The room was clean, with open-faced pro-style wooden lockers around the perimeter, the windowless walls hiding the ritual from the outside world. The smell permeated every bit of that room—even the humming yellow industrial floor fans could not drive it out through the open doors. The smell of sweaty leather gloves, shoulder pads stained by the day's work, and lived-in skates, often used for years on end, persisted. That smell settled into the locker room on the first day of practice. The day these young men met.

The head coach brought the hotseat with him from his successful college and professional experience—not the seat itself, but the process that is the "hotseat," a no-holds-barred ritual process. It was a chance for athletes to say what they wanted to and be open and honest with their teammates, a chance to get it all out because there was a championship to win, and to win it, everyone must come together. Victor Turner calls this *communitas*. The hierarchy within the organization disappears and there is a "leveling and stripping" of status among those present (Turner, *Dramas* 252). Everyone was subject to the hotseat—players, coaches, trainers. All titles disappeared.

Everyone got a sheet with the players' numbers on it and was tasked with going home and giving real thought to the analysis of each teammate. One team member interviewed for this article recalls it as an opportunity: "It's not to namecall or call people out, but to get us to come together as a team and win a championship" (Curadi). After all, the goal was to win.

At this moment, in this uncomfortable environment, the shaping of each team member as well as the team itself began. The potential for great accomplishment was planted in each player and the strengthening of the team began. As another player on that team said, "Things that created separation in the room—[we had to] get them out in the open." This was everyone's opportunity to "write as little or as much about what that player

was or wasn't doing." This was an open and honest assessment of self and teammate because "we don't think about ourselves often, so this was a chance for people to tell you about yourself" (Bertsch). The coach reinforced that sentiment as he explained how perception is reality when it comes to what teammates think of each other, and that can be a very humbling experience. He felt that peer analysis was more powerful than coach assessment (Montgomery).

The next day the team gathered in the locker room, each player sitting in front of their open stall, waiting for their number to be called. "21, you're up." Sliding off the bench, he accepted the stack of papers gathered from his teammates and sat reluctantly in the hotseat, ready for the "accountability check" designed to make him "a better teammate, a better person" (Curadi).

The team's ritual of humility helped them grow and find unity as a team.

The team won the championship that year, and one could give credit to the hotseat as this team's private ritual, a true moment of unity, of coming together in ritualized community of challenge. The hotseat is a ritual that serves as a rite of passage for the team moving from the regular season to the playoffs and as a ritual of humility for the players as their role becomes clearly defined by their teammates. What has happened up to this point no longer matters, the previous games don't matter, the statistics don't matter, and what players did or did not do well previously no longer matters. All things, and all players in the room, are equal, a feature shared by the next ritual I will discuss, practiced by a team seeking growth.

Ubuntu   "There is a word in South Africa," President Obama said during his speech at the Nelson Mandela Memorial in 2013. "Ubuntu—a word that captures Mandela's greatest gift: his recognition that we are all bound together in ways that are invisible to the eye; that there is a oneness to humanity; that we achieve ourselves by sharing ourselves with others and caring for those around us."

In the Netflix docuseries *The Playbook*, Glenn Rivers, the coach of the Boston Celtics, was introduced to the idea of *ubuntu* by a fellow university board member who could sense he was looking for a direction for his team. He

spent hours studying the idea of *ubuntu* and ultimately adopted it in response to the challenge of coaching a team full of star players who had not previously played together. Coach Rivers interpreted and presented to his team the idea of *ubuntu* as "I can't be all I can be unless you are all you can be." His hope was that the players would no longer feel threatened by the success of other players once they realized that the better one player became the better they would all become ("Doc Rivers").

Like the hotseat ritual, *ubuntu* also echoes Turner's "leveling." By adopting *ubuntu*, the star players were admitting that they were no better than anyone else and were willing to change for the good of the team. Although *ubuntu* is a philosophy, Coach Rivers and his

Boston Celtics with Coach Rivers

team applied it as a ritual. The team declared it during their huddle break at every practice, during every timeout, and frequently used the term when assessing a player's actions or behavior: "is that *ubuntu*?" ("Doc Rivers"). As a ritual, it not only was a symbolic gesture but was also practiced as a purposeful behavior, chosen to move the players from individuals to a team.

Through this ritual, players built one another up by showing genuine concern and compassion, by creating a team unity experienced by the inner circle of the organization and sensed by all those observing. This ritual inspired compassion in players towards each other. The team thrived under the ritualistic adaptation of the *ubuntu* philosophy, ultimately winning the World Championship that year. My third example takes us in the opposite direction, to athletes who used ritual to aid in the transformation from unified team to healthy individuals following separate paths.

Fire in the Can   One of the greatest franchises in the history of sport ended "with the flick of a match" ("Steve Kerr"). In 1998, the Chicago Bulls had won their sixth NBA championship during what would be the final year together for the current team lineup.

As a closing to their time together and their historical run, they gathered for one last team meeting and participated in a ritual. In ESPN's documentary *The Last Dance*, Coach Phil Jackson recalls the meeting and the ritual "where they kind of put things to rest." He pointed out to the players that this meeting was the last time they would ever be together. They needed something to help them transition from being part of this championship-

winning team to living their lives without it. They used a ritual. Coach Jackson asked each team member to write about what this team meant to them, read it out loud, and finally, put the paper in a coffee can in the center of the locker room floor.

Steven Kerr, current NBA coach and former guard on that team, notes that each player had very emotional words to share, and that the ritual brought the players together one last time, not as basketball players defined by their talents and contracts, but as people. They all stood as equals before that can. This was a chance to reflect on what they had accomplished and the people they accomplished it with, and, wherever they were in their careers, to think about what was next ("Steve Kerr").

This ritual created a moment of gratitude, a time for them to share what they meant to each other as human beings, not basketball players. When the meeting was over, Coach Jackson turned out the lights and dropped the match in the can, ending one of sports' greatest dynasties. Kerr recalls; "it was one of the most powerful things I've ever seen" ("Steve Kerr"). This ritual helped them say goodbye, it helped them end what they were and move forward into individual lives without team play.

Chicago Bulls Coach Phil Jackson and Michael Jordan

Recommendations

We often hear that sports build character, but based on the examples I have shared, I would propose that it is not the participation in the sport that builds character, but rather the rituals of sports. When thoughtfully and purposefully executed, these rituals can offer an opportunity for character building and transformation. There is constant transition in sports, and coaches are challenged daily to carry both individuals and teams through changing situations in order to experience success in the present and to encourage character development in the athlete as they pursue a life well lived. What transitions are you currently facing? What transitions have you faced in the past that you felt were missed opportunities? Were there transitions that you believe were handled well and could be duplicated to help others?

Every year, team, and player are different. There are coaches steadfast in their ways of doing things and there are coaches who are constantly

shaping their philosophy, regardless of their personal approach or their past experience. They know that a team's dynamic, which changes from year to year, is what ultimately drives the success of the program. A ritual is not necessarily the best choice just because it worked once before, or because the coach experienced it as a player. It has to fit the personality of the team, a personality that only the coach truly knows.

The importance of coaches in the ritual process cannot be overlooked. Each example of ritual in this article was developed and implemented by the coach. In "Shifting Our Mindset," Joe Sabin points to the role of a coach as someone that should make an intentional effort to be a mentor and hopefully have influence on the athletes beyond the field of play (46–47). Thoughtfully including rituals to assist during transitions encourages character growth and healthy transformation.

How can ritual help you move your team and players forward? We have explored a ritual that brings humility to a team, one that fosters compassion, and another that promotes gratitude. What is it that you want for the individuals on your team?

David Brooks, in *The Road to Character*, points out that when character is formed or changed, the person subject to change had "to humble themselves in self-awareness if they had any hope of rising up transformed" (13). The aforementioned rituals all had transforming qualities for the athletes. The rituals were pivotal moments in the athletes' careers and lives.

The hotseat most directly illustrates Brooks' emphasis because it was a ritual of humility. Physically sitting in front of peers, reading out loud what one does well and what needs to change is a transformative experience. The transformative effect of *ubuntu*

Thoughtfully including rituals to assist during transitions encourages character growth and healthy transformation.

was evident in the compassion shown toward teammates. After the Bulls gathered one last time—not as basketball players but as human beings—to share their gratitude for one another after an incredible accomplishment, they could move on to the next phase of their careers and lives.

Brooks believes these moments can be small everyday events and can shape character slowly, or they can arrive as a "huge crucible" moment, a milestone moment in life (14). These three examples of sports ritual would certainly fit the definition of crucible moments in these athletes' lives—

departing on a journey to a championship, pursuing yet another banner to hang in the rafters to join the ranks of a sports legacy, or closing out a decorated career and moving on to another phase of life. These exercises in humility, compassion, and gratitude are a reminder to the athlete that they are not the "center of the universe" and that their "individual talents" are not enough in the pursuit of the larger goal (263). Brooks invokes something greater than sports: life is the larger goal, but these rituals act as single, powerful moments that shape the lives of these athletes.

We hear the phrase "we are our own worst critics" frequently used in the context of being too hard on ourselves or not giving ourselves enough credit for who we are or what we accomplish. We need a critical outside eye or, as Brooks calls it, "redemptive assistance," which is the idea that others can help us through our struggles because they too have faced their own challenges (263). This can be likened to the rookie-veteran relationship in sports. A veteran, by definition, is one who has had a lot of experience in a particular field. In a sports team construct, they give the younger players helpful advice in areas such as skill development, game and practice preparation, travel etiquette, and dealing with victory and loss.

Life is the larger goal, but these rituals act as single, powerful moments that shape the lives of these athletes.

These "crucible" moments occur in both sports and life. One might happen in an open and honest conversation with a friend or family member when your "blind spot" is revealed to you, or in an honest evaluation of your skill and teamwork at a crucial time in the sports season. Some level of discomfort, nervousness, defensiveness is likely to arise. Whatever the response, it is an emotional moment, a possible turning point. An evaluation of you by others that ideally is followed by deep reflection.

During the hotseat ritual, most players knew what was likely going to be said about them, but as one player from that team said, "Self-truth is tough, introspection is tough, the natural reaction is *not me*" (Bertsch). This moment of transition is monumental, for the team going into the playoffs and for the player as a person going into life. As suggested by the junior hockey coach, these moments should be perceived as opportunities for growth as a person, whether it is to improve in certain areas or further build your strengths. The intention of the person addressing you is to help you grow, for your own good and for the benefit of all involved—the team, the family, the relationship.

It has been said that it is not the situation but how we respond to the situation that defines us. What do you do in that moment when people are being honest with you and implore that you be honest with yourself? That single moment when the words are spoken can feel like an eternity. What do you do next in that moment? And in the moments to come? Others are being honest with you, and now you are asked to be honest with yourself. This is a moment of self-reflection: Who do I think I am? Who do others think I am? Who really am I? The pivotal moment is the ritual, but the most important moment is the one that follows, as that is the moment with the potential for actual transformation.

No one knows their team better than the coach. It is a powerful position and the impact rituals can have is real. How can we create ritual to be purposeful behavior as Vernimmen suggests, and not merely the meaningless gesture Merton defines? How

It is not the situation but how we respond to the situation that defines us.

can rituals be used to help teams make it through transitions and do so in a way that transforms and grows character? For that matter, how can athletes make the most of the chance to grow through ritual? Just as coaches have the responsibility to create and reinforce rituals, athletes, too, have the responsibility to embrace opportunities to develop their character with self-reflection, humility, and authenticity.

1) Create Moments. The ritual is all about creating a powerful, meaningful moment. The ritual does not have to be new but it must be refined for this particular team in this particular moment. Make sure the honesty and emotion of the ritual is age-appropriate. Decide when it is going to be used. Will it be a single exercise in a crucial point of the season like the hotseat or the Bulls' ritual, or one that will better serve the team with frequency like *ubuntu*?

2) Be Sincere. Treat the ritual like the powerful tool it is. There are plenty of traditions and routines that the team can partake in throughout the season, but the ritual to shape the players should be approached with respect and sincerity. Powerful moments in life often induce anxiety and nervousness, reflecting the depth, honesty, and sincerity of the moment. Give it profound meaning.

3) Practice Reflection. Because the ritual is powerful, coaches should give and athletes should take time to process, time for the liminal space, the in-betweenness of past performance and future hopes. Coaches,

you know best how to approach your athletes. Not everyone reacts the same to the same moment. Time and space are valuable in this process, so make sure to allow for both. The value of the ritual process can start to be realized through a reflective meeting with the athlete, in conversation among athletes, or it may be manifested in an athlete's personal reflection and growth that takes place in solitude.

4) Promote Autonomy. Coaches, be part of the process, don't control the process. When approaching ritual, because it can be a "leveling" experience, it is important to be embedded in the team rather than in your coaching role. Create an atmosphere of equality so that the players might be more open and honest. Additionally, let the moment flow. Let go of the "coach control," and let the process define itself. Athletes, take responsibility for your development and watch for ways to participate in the process more fully.

5) Reinforce the Ritual. Keep the ritual alive, along with all that it has done for the team. Make reference to the ritual at appropriate times, but remember to always approach it with the respect it deserves. Don't diminish it by going to "the well" too often. Remind players individually of the effect it had on them and also choose strategic team moments when its power can be reinforced.

However you choose to go about encountering ritual in your team's experience, keep in mind the greater goal—to encourage character growth that will impact athletes' lives even beyond their sports experience. In James Kerr's book *Legacy*, he explores the unmatched success of the famous New Zealand All Blacks rugby team, noting that their focus was on the "personal

Engouraging growth through ritual

development, both as human beings and as professional sportsmen, so that they had the character, composure and people skills to be leaders both on and off the field" (517). Rituals such as the honest evaluation by peers, creating an atmosphere of humility in the hotseat; the practice of *ubuntu*, expressing compassion toward others; and the gratitude of others as not just teammates but friends who accomplished something unprecedented all help those who participate to develop identity and purpose beyond their sport. Sports, like life, is full of transitions and presents the opportunity to use rituals to help those transitional moments become deeper, more meaningful and life altering—truly transformative—experiences.

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Stepping over the Brink into Artificial Intelligence

Ann Mauss

Abstract

We live in a world where we are in transition, increasingly relinquishing our decision-making process to computers, but are computers trustworthy enough to make our decisions for us? Artificial Intelligence, which drives the computing decision process, is a growing field in computing, but we must understand how it works and the justice and ethical issues it faces in order to ensure that decisions by current and future algorithms and A.I.s reflect moral virtues.

Would you follow your phone's directions off a cliff? We have all heard the stories of people trusting their phones so implicitly that they end up having accidents. They have walked off Chicago's Navy Pier into Lake Michigan, into traffic, and most often, into other people, but a man from the United Kingdom almost followed his phone off a cliff. Robert Jones had traveled many miles using the GPS app on his phone. Mr. Jones was driving to a place he had never been before, and the GPS app instructed him to turn down a dirt lane. What he did not know was that it was just a small footpath ending at a cliff. Fortunately for him, there was a fence at the top of the cliff, so he was stopped before making a 100 ft. drop (Brooke).

Would you follow your phone's directions off a cliff?

What would have caused the app to decide that the footpath was a valid road for vehicles? Why would Robert Jones follow so unquestioningly? We

are living in a world where our lives are changing at a rapid pace, and technology is a driver in that change. We look to computers for answers because we expect them to make better decisions than us. With little or no thought to the consequences, we increasingly relinquish our decision-making processes, ceding more and more control to computers and computer applications.

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The problem is that computers are not trustworthy, just, or virtuous. As computer intelligence increases at exponential rates, we need to understand how they arrive at their answers and decisions. This article discusses the machine-learning algorithms that are behind many of the applications we use, the data used and information produced, the potential for inherent bias and lack of transparency in how they are developed, and the need to bring virtue into the conversation. We stand at a precipice in our society, transitioning from an analog decision-making process to a digital one with our feet teetering on the edge of this proverbial cliff.

Teaching a Dog to Sit

We use computer applications for all types of functions, and each of these follows some type of algorithm. Simply defined, an algorithm is a precise step-by-step set of instructions for solving a task. If these steps are followed correctly, it will result in a solution to a given task. It is a broad definition because any recipe can count as an algorithm. Computer algorithms, however, have a more specific definition.

Computer algorithms are mathematical objects—using a wide variety of equations, algebra, calculus, logic and probability—applied in the code of a programming language. "They are given an objective, and set to work crunching through calculations to achieve their aim" (Fry 8). Algorithms function in four basic ways, and most computer applications use at least one of the following functions, but many use a combination of them. It is important to understand how they function, so that we can address the various problems they can cause.

- **Prioritization**—Algorithms present an ordered list. We see this type of algorithm when GPS apps find the fastest route.

- **Classification**—Algorithms find similar things and group them. These are often used by advertisers to target ads based on a person's previous choices.

- **Association**—Algorithms identify and mark relationships between things. You can see these working in dating sites or at Amazon in the "those who looked at that looked at this."

- **Filtering**—Algorithms determine what is important and filter out what isn't. Voice recognition software does this, as well as social media sites that filter news stories to fit in with your personal feed (Fry 8–10).

Most applications use a combination of these algorithmic functions at any time in their programing, but what really counts is how they perform these tasks. As stated earlier, algorithms are step-by-step instructions, but it is how these steps are defined that makes a difference. Humans view the world in ranges, spectrums, and frequencies and see many shades of gray. We call this an analog view. Computers, on the other hand, work in a black and white world, a state of ones and zeros, ons and offs. We call this a digital or binary view. It is because of this binary, digital simplicity that we humans blindly trust computers for accurate information and believe that they can make more impartial decisions than we can make on our own.

There are two basic approaches to designing algorithms: rules-based algorithms and machine-learning algorithms. Rules-based algorithms are closer to the textbook definition of algorithms. Programmers define and design the step-by-step logic that the computer uses to solve a task. It is easy for humans to follow how the computer arrived at a solution or correct it when it fails. These algorithms are used to solve known problems, and there is little ambiguity to them. Machine-learning algorithms are very different. These algorithms fall under the broader category of Artificial Intelligence (A.I.). The implementation of A.I. is in its infancy, but it is advancing at a rapid pace.

Machine-learning algorithms are based on how humans—or any kind of animal—learn how to do something. For example, I trained my dog to stay by just holding my hand in a specific position. She learned that specific hand position means *stay* through a series of

Feedback serves as a reward to algorithms for correct answers.

trial and error. I would reward her when she stayed and would withhold the reward if she performed any other behaviors when I gave that hand signal. Eventually, she figured out what that hand signal meant, and she became steadily faster at associating staying with a reward, quickly responding with the correct action. Machine-learning algorithms "learn" in a similar fashion. It starts by stating a clear objective that we want to reach. The programming provides feedback by offering a "reward" or acknowledgment of a correct answer, and no reward for an incorrect answer. Like a mouse in a maze, the algorithm finds the right path through trial and error. To give it a simplistic definition, "You give the machine data, a goal, and feedback when it's on the right track—and leave it to work out the best way of achieving the end" (Fry 11).

There are issues with each aspect of the algorithm learning process. For instance, humans cannot always trace the algorithm's learning path and many times this opaqueness is by design of the programmers. This is the issue of transparency.

Computer Algorithms		
Aspect	**What is it?**	**Questions Raised**
Data	The initial information fed to the algorithm	What data is used? Where does it come from?
Feedback	The answer determined by the algorithm	What is considered a correct answer? Who or what determines the correct answer?
Learning	The path the computer takes to get to an answer	How does it arrive at the answer?

A common use of these algorithms is teaching a computer to "talk" and the implementation of these algorithms have revealed multiple problems. Conversational speech applications have revealed multiple issues concerning social bias and algorithm transparency.

Teaching a Computer to Talk

A type of programming that machine-learning algorithms excel at is Natural Language Processing (NLP), which is a branch of A.I. These algorithms help

computers understand, interpret, and manipulate human language. Let's break down the parts of an A.I. algorithm. It needs a lot of data to learn from. In most cases, programmers look to the Internet and the abundant and widely available data that it offers, believing that data, in large scales, will provide algorithms with an exponential set of data points that broaden the learning outcomes. It can come from Google, Twitter, or a myriad of other platforms or data brokers.[1]

NLP algorithms provide an excellent example of how data is used and processed, and how they reflect an inherent bias. These algorithms start with a known dataset of words, called word embeddings. There are several embeddings widely available on the Internet that can be used. "The words become vectors in a multi-dimensional space, where nearby vectors represent similar meanings. With word embeddings, you can compare words by (roughly) what they mean, not just exact string matches" (Speer 3). This is comparable to using words in the context of a sentence to find a definition of a word. These are the input (data) for the algorithms.

Since feedback is the next step in the process, we need to understand the sentiment lexicons, or collections of words, that the algorithms use for their feedback. Sentiment analysis uses online systems such as Amazon, Twitter, or Facebook to extract and analyze public views and opinions and build lexicon datasets. The lexicon datasets help define the positive and negative words from the word embedding.

In "How to Make a Racist AI Without Really Trying" Robyn Speer tested how these lexicons interpreted the words in the embeddings. She created an algorithm that evaluated the words using the sentiment lexicon, ascribing -1 for negative words and +1 for positive words, thereby coming up with a sentiment score. Some of the words that were evaluated were people's names with different adjectives. She found that the datasets have a statistically significant bias of positive for "white" names and negative for "black" names (Speer 14). It would also rate Mexican restaurants more unfavorably than Italian restaurants (Speer 10). How did the algorithm come to this conclusion just by the difference in the words Mexican and Italian?

The problem is that computers are not trustworthy, just, or virtuous.

This problem is rooted in the feedback that the algorithm receives from the lexicon, but the question that remains is how the lexicon defined these seemingly neutral words so differently. As stated earlier, lexicons rate words

based on how they are used in context across many different platforms: Facebook posts, Twitter feeds, Instagram captions, etc. The algorithm uses these contextual situations as the input it needs to understand a positive or negative word. This illustrates a crucial point about these algorithms. They are not created with a built-in bias; rather, they are learning the bias that we project upon the words. In Speers' experiment, she adapted her NLP lexicon to adjust for this bias and created a less biased outcome, but it was not completely neutral.

This leads us to the next part of the process: how does the algorithm find its answer? Herein lies a key problem with these types of NLP and other machine-learning algorithms. "If you let a machine figure out the solution for itself, the route it takes to get there often won't make sense to a human observer" (Fry 11). The issue is a lack of transparency in how the algorithms arrive at their answers. Most computer developers claim intellectual property on their process of developing their algorithms and, therefore, no one can see the inner workings of the machine.
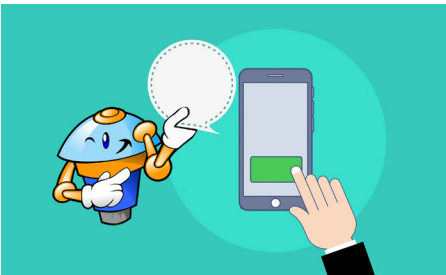
Chatbots are extentions of Natural Language Processing algorithms.

In 2016, Microsoft launched a new chatbot: Tay. A chatbot is an extension of NLP algorithms, and Tay was an experiment in "conversational understanding." Tay was designed to communicate with humans as if it were another human, a teenage girl to be specific. It was programmed to learn about language over time, thus being able to have, in theory, conversations about any topic. Tay was described as "the intersection of machine learning, natural language processing, and social networks." Within a few hours, however, Tay's tweets became more racist and misogynistic until Twitter received so many complaints that Microsoft took the account down after only 16 hours of being online (Schwartz).

What Microsoft did not see, and many argued they should have seen, is how easily the "repeat after me" function was manipulated. It didn't take long for Internet trolls to find and attack the Twitter account and inundate it with all kinds of vitriol. Many argued that, in the design of Tay, Microsoft should have been asking "how can this be used to hurt someone," and they did not follow through in their obligation to society (Schwartz).

Microsoft eventually fixed the problem with Tay and released an updated version, Zo, a few months later. Zo was "designed to shut down conversations about certain contentious topics, including politics and religion, to ensure she didn't offend people." And if Zo was attacked about these subjects, updates in the algorithm directed it to shut down completely and disconnect from the conversation (Schwartz).

Garbage In Garbage Out

In order to address the bias that the algorithms project, we must first look at where the algorithms learn this bias. We feed the algorithms data from our current culture. In many of my classes, I explain to my students the concept of GIGO—**G**arbage **I**n

We need to be particularly aware of algorithms that could have a severe impact on the lives of humans.

Garbage **O**ut. What this means is that if you are using invalid, inaccurate, or skewed data as input into your system, you will get invalid, inaccurate, or skewed information from the system. The algorithms are getting data from our imperfect world, whether hyper-divisive vitriol from social media or records from a systemically unjust system, so the A.I. data is not neutral.

Even though Tay's way of communication became offensive to many people, it could be argued that the hurt was not long lasting and had minimal effects on people. Over time, however, this could cause profound harm to people. It is especially concerning as we multiply this by the number of applications that use the data. The examples above raise an ethical dilemma: What version of humanity do we want reflected in our technology? Or put another way, what human values do we want reflected back to us?

Both Speer and Microsoft, the "owners" of their respective algorithms, took action and worked to correct a problem. What about other algorithms with inner workings that are not transparent and/or that could produce a larger or more egregious offense? We need to be particularly aware of algorithms that could have a severe impact on the lives of humans, such as those used in our criminal justice system.

Making Biased Decisions

Algorithms have been used throughout our criminal justice system for years with the thought that reducing a person to a simple number makes

dispensing justice easier. These measures are based on the belief that these algorithms come up with an accurate depiction of the person that is being sentenced and therefore can make decisions for judges. That is not always the case.

The U.S. criminal justice system uses algorithms to determine sentencing.

The cases of Brisha Borden and Vernon Prater, both of Coral Springs, Florida, illustrate major problems with using algorithms for decision-making in the criminal justice system. Borden and Prater were both arrested for petty theft. Borden had picked up a bike from the sidewalk and tried to ride it before abandoning it, and Prater had shoplifted $86.35 worth of tools from a Home Depot. Even though the offenses do not seem very different, the way they were treated by the justice system was. Borden's bond was set to a much higher amount than Prater's bond, which on the surface seems odd for seemingly similar offenses.

Brisha Borden was 18 years old at the time of the offense, and is a black woman. She only had four juvenile misdemeanors on her record. Prater was 41 years old at the time of the offense, and is a white man. He had two armed robberies and one attempted robbery on his record. The judges in each case used a computer algorithm that rated the likelihood of recidivism of offenders. Borden scored higher on the recidivism scale than Prater, and was therefore given a higher bond at her hearing. Two years later Borden had not been charged with any new crimes and Prater was sentenced to 8 years in prison for stealing thousands of dollars' worth of electronics.

The judges in these hearings used a software that is widely used across the country, Correctional Offender Management Profiling for Alternative Sanctions (COMPAS). In an analysis by ProPublica,[3] they "found that black defendants were far more likely than white defendants to be incorrectly judged to be at a higher risk of recidivism, while white defendants were more likely than black defendants to be incorrectly flagged as low risk" (Larson et al.). As with many machine-learning algorithms, there are several factors at play in the way it is biased, but it is hard to say what exactly causes the bias. Since COMPAS is the property of Northpointe, Inc., a privately held for-profit corporation, the actual algorithm and inner workings of the program are not accessible.

Northpointe "does not publicly disclose the calculations used to arrive at defendants' risk scores, so it is not possible for either defendants or the public to see what might be driving the disparity" (Angwin et al.). Since they claim that the software is proprietary, there is a significant transparency issue at stake. What we do know is that they used the records of thousands of criminals to define its algorithm. Several studies have concluded that a systemic bias exists in our criminal justice system. Therefore, the data that Northpointe used for its system could reflect the systemic racism that plagues our justice system. As shown earlier, using biased data as input for an algorithm (Angwin et al.) leads to biased results unless the code includes some additional compensation to ensure unbiased output.

Due to the "black box" situation with Northpointe, we cannot see the inner workings of the machine, in this case, the programming of the algorithms. By claiming that the algorithms are their intellectual property, Northpointe doesn't legally have to reveal anything about their software. Without seeing the actual programming code, there is no way to know if the algorithm is compensating for these systemic issues or not. Many judicial systems in the country rely heavily on the scores that this software produces. Without being able to see how it is arriving at its answer, the software could cause harm to many vulnerable people at an exponential rate.

Since transparency issues make it difficult to see how many machine-learning algorithms arrive at an answer, we cannot completely adjust for the bias when writing the algorithm, as Speers' experiment illustrates. In *Technology and the Virtues*, Shannon Vallor argues that "We need to cultivate in ourselves, collectively, a special kind of moral character, one that expresses what I will call the technomoral virtues" (Vallor 1). We must first change our culture, our own moral codes, and system biases. That is, we must first become more virtuous people.

Overhauling an entire culture to place more value on virtue is a huge project. While we work on that we still need to determine how to protect people from the harm that the bias in these systems may cause and identify our moral responsibility for any injustices caused by the decisions from these algorithms.

We must first change our own moral codes, and system biases.

The 21st century decisions on how to live well—that is about *ethics*—are not simply moral choices. They are *technomoral* choices, for they depend on the evolving affordances of the technological systems that

we rely upon to support and to mediate our lives in ways and to degrees never before witnessed. (Vallor 2)

In our transition to A.I., we must recognize the moral dimension, now more than ever.

Building a Better Future

There are two parts to building a more virtuous future. Individuals must become more virtuous people, taking responsibility for all actions, and communities must hold everyone to a virtuous standard. To become more virtuous, we can look to Aristotle for direction.

Aristotle was concerned with moral virtue understood as "excellence of . . . the soul" (1102a16-17) as the pathway to well-being. We develop character throughout our lifetime. It begins as we are young and as our parents teach us right from wrong, and their own moral code. It then develops as we apply these lessons throughout our life experiences, building habits of character, habits of moral virtue (1103a17-1103b25). Two of Aristotle's cardinal virtues are particularly pertinent to this discussion of human-A.I. decision-making—Prudence and Justice.

- **Prudence**—making judgments based on practical wisdom (1140b1-10).

- **Justice**—recognizing what is good for the community and taking up a course of action that reflects this (1129b17-1130a13).

A prudent person exhibits practical wisdom and "is guided by appropriate feeling and intelligence, rather than mindless habit or rote compulsion to follow fixed moral scripts provided by religious, political or cultural institutions" (Vallor 25). Thus a prudent person does more than just follow the rules. A prudent person acts thoughtfully and deliberately, and makes decisions with

Algorithms work in a world of black and white.

a keen insight into the consequences of the decision (Aristotle 1140a25-31). Humans use prior knowledge and consider extenuating circumstances when making a decision. It is difficult to ascribe these attributes to an algorithm. Algorithms only work in a world of black and white, and decisions

are based solely on predefined structures. William Hasselberger, computer scientist and pioneer in A.I., calls this the "Input Problem" (986) because the algorithm cannot distinguish a morally acceptable input from an immoral one.

Algorithms do not "see" the same context as humans do. Humans have an analog view of the world, seeing it in many shades and degrees. In the Brisha Borden case, a human would have factored her age and her previous misdemeanors, rather than basing the decision only on boxes that have been checked. "The person who enacts fixed moral rules 'correctly' but rigidly—without style, feeling, thought, or flexibility—is, on this view, a shallow parody of virtue" (Vallor 25). But this is the only way that computers can apply rules, fundamentally exhibiting a distinct inclination to be a shallow parody of virtue.

Aristotle's view of justice focuses on what is right for the community as a whole (1129b17-19). He believes in equitable distributions and the correction of inequity (1131a10-1131b24). From this viewpoint, we must correct the inequity of our systems in order to achieve justice for all. Herein lies the conundrum of our algorithm problem: if the injustice originates in the data *and* we cannot see how the algorithm "learns" from this data, how can we achieve equity?

In order to take care of the "Input Problem," social media platforms have to vigorously police online posts and news for vitriol and remove those users who are offensive. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have stepped up their responses but they have not consistently applied their own rules. It is virtually impossible to rid the data itself of prejudice and bias. The answer, then, is for all social media users to take up the mantle and decide to be virtuous people.

Some users will fail to be virtuous, so algorithm developers should take measures to mitigate the inequity inherent in the system. They need to evaluate the context of the use of the algorithm and decide what values they wish it to reflect. This, however, will require developers to be completely transparent with their developments, sharing not only how their algorithms work, but also the data they are using to teach the algorithm.

If the injustice originates in the data and we cannot see how the algorithm "learns" from this data, how can we achieve equity?

One such developer, IBM,[4] has made ethical considerations a priority by issuing and adhering to principles of A.I. development.

> For the public to trust AI, it must be transparent. Technology companies must be clear about who trains their AI systems, what data was used in that training and, most importantly, what went into their algorithm's recommendations. If we are to use AI to help make important decisions, it must be explainable. ("IBM's Principles")

IBM goes even further by calling for all developers to follow their example. "We encourage all technology companies to adopt similar principles to protect client data and insights, and to ensure the responsible and transparent use of artificial intelligence and other transformative innovations" ("IBM's Principles"). IBM is a major player in the computing industry, but it is only one of many players. This is a step in the right direction, but the past has shown that having corporations police themselves does not always work. Corporations aim to earn profits and maximize their shareholder wealth. Ethics and justice often take a back seat to these goals.

Unregulated A.I. is the greatest existential crisis humanity faces today.

If we can learn anything from the past, it is that we cannot leave it up to individual corporations and developers to regulate themselves. Corporations will do what is in their best interests, which at times are at odds with the greater good of society. Elon Musk[5] understands this situation very clearly. He knows how quickly A.I. can improve:

> We are rapidly headed towards digital super intelligence that far exceeds any human. . . . And the rate of improvement is exponential. This is a very serious danger to the public, and therefore, there needs to be a public body that has insight and then oversight to confirm that everyone is developing A.I. safely. (Ritm 1)

If one or a few companies manage to develop "God-like superintelligence," humanity will be subject to the whim of these companies. If they are virtuous and use their development justly, then humanity's situation will likely improve, but if not, they could take over the world.

Given the significant impact that A.I. can have on humanity as whole, it is imperative that we take action immediately. Of course, a wholesale move by the population toward a more virtuous culture is unlikely at best, and

we certainly can't expect all corporations to behave virtuously. If we are to achieve justice, the first step is to have governing bodies regulate and review companies that develop and implement machine-learning algorithms. In the pharmaceutical industry, the FDA oversees and regulates the development and production of drugs, and must approve any drug before it can be distributed to the public. Similarly, we should have a governing body that oversees A.I. developers. This governing body should oversee and regulate A.I. development and approve any A.I. algorithm before it is used by any corporation or individual.

Unregulated A.I. is the greatest existential crisis humanity faces today. Computers permeate every facet of our societies, and because they are no longer confined to one physical machine, data and algorithms can persist forever. We need to consider all of this before ceding our thinking to them. Elon Musk notes, "I believe that the danger of A.I. is much greater than the danger of nuclear warheads by a lot. Nobody would suggest that we allow anyone to just build nuclear warheads if they want. The least scary future I can think of is where we have, at least, democratized A.I." (Ritm 1). If we democratize A.I., we at least have a voice in how they function and can preserve our moral integrity.

Conclusion

In today's world, technology seamlessly adheres to Moore's Law.[6] We are swiftly transitioning from human decision-making to A.I. decision-making, a "betwixt and between" liminal state as we contemplate the future use of A.I. in our decision-making processes. We use these machine-learning algorithms to enhance our lives today, but it is the digital superintelligence that is now being developed that we have to worry about.[7]

Liminality

We need to look at the data these algorithms use, how they address any bias in this data, and how they come up with answers. By becoming a more virtuous society and providing proper oversight, we can develop an A.I. that reflects back the values we want to see. If we do not take action now, before computers surpass our own intelligence, we could be handing over our future to an eternal, unjust A.I. without even realizing it. We have

blindly followed a winding path: now we stand at a precipice in our society, transitioning from benign systems to immortal dictators, our toes hanging over the edge of a proverbial cliff.

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Notes

[1] Data brokers specialize in accumulating a wide variety of publicly available information, aggregating it, and then selling this information to others.

[2] ProPublica is an independent, non-profit newsroom that produces investigative journalism. The journalists for this article were 2017 Pulitzer Prize finalists in Explanatory Reporting.

[3] IBM was one of the first developers of machine-learning technologies with Deep Blue, a computer that was designed to play chess and was famous for beating Garry Kasparov.

[4] Elon Musk is CEO of Tesla, Inc., founder and CEO of SpaceX, the Boring Company, and Neuralink—all companies that create and develop A.I. technologies.

[5] Moore's Law states that the speed and capability of our computers increases every one and a half to two years.

[6] For further discussion on how computers can impact society, see Ritm 1 or Ng.

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Does the Truth Matter?
Truth-Telling as Resistance and Hope in a Post-Truth Era

Mary Emily Briehl Duba

Abstract

We deceive one another in big ways and small. Some have even proposed that we are transitioning into a "post-truth" culture in which truth is a devalued currency. Does the truth matter anymore? Not only does the truth matter, this essay argues, but telling the truth is the first necessary step toward facing well the numerous crises of our day, from a global pandemic to climate change. Truth-telling is an act of faithful resistance and practical hope.

I deceived my daughter. At the very least, I didn't tell her the truth. My daughter had broken her favorite headband. Made of rigid purple plastic molded to look like a chain of flowers, it snapped in half when she flexed it too far. Sobbing, she walked the pieces over to our recycling bin, laid them in tenderly, and said—with all the sincerity of a preschooler trying to be brave—"I hope it gets made into a new headband for another little girl." It soothed her tears to do this, so I did nothing to discourage her from imagining an idyllic cycle of transformation by which everything old can become new again and everything broken can be melted down into a new purpose and joy. "I hope so, too," I told her.

The broken pieces stayed in the recycling bin until garbage night when, after she was fast asleep, I moved them to the trash. I didn't want to tell her the truth: her headband wasn't stamped with the familiar recycling symbol. It wasn't made of the right type of plastic. From the moment it was made that

headband was destined for the landfill. It was a small deceit to let her think otherwise, but that is only the beginning.

When it comes to recycling, we have all been fed a lie. Here is what happened: in the 1980s, the plastic industry faced a crisis of disapproval. Concerned citizens were worried about the growing mass of plastic in landfills and oceans so they encouraged their cities to pass bans on certain plastics, like those used for disposable cups, razors, and take-out containers. But the plastic industry

The amount of plastics in landfills has quadrupled since the 1980s.

wanted to sell more plastic, not less, so they devised a plan. Over the next few years, they spent millions of dollars on a media campaign designed to convince the American public that plastic is an environmentally sound choice because it can be recycled. The plastic industry sold us the promise of recycling in order to sell more plastic (Young).

The trouble is that they did this knowing that recycling plastic is not economically viable. It costs more to recycle plastic than it costs to put it in a landfill, which is exactly what happens to most plastic waste. Less than 10% of the plastic produced in the past forty years has ever been recycled (*Plastics*). It was a profitable deceit. As for the mass of plastic in our landfills those citizens were concerned about? It has quadrupled since the 1980s (Young).[1]

More pernicious than plastic is the problem of deceit. We deceive one another in big ways and small, from well-funded misinformation campaigns to the everyday fibs and half-truths we tell one another. Deceit manipulates another's perception of reality, usually in a way that benefits the deceiver. Whether between a mother and daughter or a multibillion-dollar industry and the public, deceit is a violation of trust and a misuse of power.

While deceit is nothing new, it is swiftly becoming a cultural norm. Political leaders and pundits peddle false realities and "alternative facts" that suit their interests. Corporations lie to the public about the safety of their products.[2] Public influencers cast doubt on time-honored ways of pursuing truth: scientific study, scholarly research, and investigative journalism. Conspiracy theories masquerade as reality and lure us into their dangerous web of magical thinking. Social media amplifies false stories, spreading them faster and wider than the truth (Vosoughi et al.).[3] Put it all together and

some cultural observers propose that our growing disregard for the truth marks our transition to a "post-truth" era.

The timing couldn't be worse. At the very moment that the truth is becoming a devalued currency, we face numerous crises that only truth-telling can begin to address: a global pandemic, racial injustices, economic inequalities, and the existential threat of climate change. Faced with these crises, many are using misinformation, lies, deceit, and denial to pretend they aren't real or important.

We have a choice to make, as individuals and as a society. Will we seek out and speak the truth about these hard realities so that we can work together for a more just, humane, and peaceful world? Or will we continue to deny their severity, deceive ourselves and one another, *More pernicious than plastic is the problem of deceit.* and contribute to a culture of distrust and division? I hope we choose the former. I believe that only on the firm foundation of true shared reality will we be able to trust one another and work together to cultivate a world in which all people and creation flourish together.

Truth-telling, I argue, is an act of faithful resistance and practical hope in this time of critical transition. To this end, I begin by discussing the allures and dangers of deceit, focusing on the ways it breeds distrust and division. Then, I show how telling the truth—to ourselves, to one another, and to power—builds trust and true shared reality, which in turn opens the way to peace. I close by proposing some ways we can practice truth-telling in our everyday lives as an act of a faithful resistance and practical hope.

The Dangers of Deceit

Deceit poses real dangers to our life together in human community. Deceit violates trust and fractures our shared reality, without which we cannot live well together. When we deceive someone, we invite them into a false reality. As tempting as it may be, such deceit is dangerous because it undermines trust, breeds division and chaos, and thwarts the possibility of peace, community, and collective action for the common good. But before we can grasp the dangers of deceit, we must first appreciate what deceit is and why it is so alluring.

What Is Deceit?   We deceive others when we lead them to believe something untrue. Deceit promotes a false sense of reality. Lying is one way

to deceive, but not all deception is lying. We can also deceive one another by manipulating or omitting facts, manufacturing doubt or denial in order to mislead someone, or undermining the credibility of someone speaking the truth.

I didn't lie to my daughter about the fate of her headband, but I did deceive her by omitting facts (like that the plastic wasn't recyclable) and encouraging her to hope for something I knew was not possible. Lying is saying that President Trump's inauguration drew "the largest audience ever to witness an inauguration" (it didn't) (Hunt); but deception is also cropping a photo of the inauguration in a way that makes the crowd appear bigger than it was.[4] Both violate people's trust. Both promote a false sense of reality.

2017 inauguration crowd (uncropped)

The Allure of Deceit   We live today at the convergence of many hard realities. From our ecological crisis to social and economic injustices and a global pandemic, the truths about our world are hard to bear. Creation itself—the common ground of our life together—cries out under human misuse and abuse. People worldwide already are displaced by the droughts, famines, and shrinking coastal lands caused by the rising tides and temperatures of climate change.[5] Our Black, Latinx, Asian-American, undocumented, and Indigenous neighbors cry out—in the streets, from their homes, in prisons, at work, and on the borders—for breath, dignity, and justice. The pandemic has changed our way of life, marking our shared reality with loss, loneliness, and exhaustion.

When reality is hard, deceit—along with its sidekicks, denial and distraction—becomes increasingly attractive. We deceive ourselves about hard realties because facing them requires us to do hard things like accept complicity, feel regret, repair harm, make amends, try something new. This is true in my own life. The more a new piece of information asks of me, the more fervently I resist it. I don't want it to be true. I don't want to do the hard thing.

Deceit and denial seem to offer an escape from difficult realities. They allow us to convince others (and even ourselves) that reality is different than it is: *I'm not complicit. We couldn't have known. It's not that bad.* In this way, deceit and denial are distorted forms of regret and hope. I *wish* I hadn't

done it. We *regret* our complicity. We *wish* we had acted on what we knew. We *hope* it can be made right.

We also seek escape from hard realities in distraction. Perhaps this is why we spend more than half of each day looking at screens and connected to media: approximately 12 hours and 20 minutes of every 24 hours ("Nielsen"). We barely look up. Our encounter with the world—our experience of life itself—is heavily mediated by influencers, pundits, advertisements, content curated by algorithms to keep us scrolling. This means that by escaping in distraction, we make ourselves more susceptible to the deceits and misinformation campaigns that flourish online. We are a captive audience for those who wish to manipulate our perception of reality.

Deceit, denial, and distraction allow us to take shelter from hard truths in alternative realities built of "alternative facts." They allow us to hide in sanitized histories that ease our consciences of complicity in colonialism, slavery, and their aftermaths. We turn up the music so we don't have to hear creation crying out from under the collapse of the very life systems upon which we depend. But—like hiding in a tent during a tornado—the false realities sold to us will not protect us from the truth for long and, when it catches up to us, the consequences will be devastating.

The Dangers of Deceit   The dangers of deceit are multiple and overlapping. Deceit generates distrust between people and undermines our shared reality. In technical terms, "shared reality" means a world of experience that we inhabit together and feel similarly about. When we watch a movie with a friend and laugh at the same scenes, we are sharing that reality. When we reminisce about childhood Sundays in grandma's backyard with our cousins, we are inhabiting the same memories of a shared reality. When we attend a support group where everyone present shares a common experience of loss or struggle, we take comfort in sharing that reality. Whether for a fleeting moment with a stranger or over a lifetime with a beloved, shared reality is the basis of human relationship and connection. Indeed, a longing for shared reality is part of being human.[6]

Deceit, denial, and distraction allow us to take shelter from hard truths.

Deceit undermines shared reality. When I didn't tell my daughter the truth about her headband's landfill destiny, I invited her into a fantasy that I do not share. I drove a wedge between the worlds we inhabit. Similarly, when those in power deceive the public—misleading and manipulating all of

us together—it harms the fabric of society by distorting our sense of true shared reality.

Deceit denies equal access to facts, which damages democracy and prevents us from working well together to address the crises we face. Remember the plastic industry's profitable deceit? If they had told us the truth—that recycling plastic was not (at least not *yet*) an economically or ecologically viable solution to the problem of plastic waste—we could have worked together to prevent the tons of plastic that have since exploded in our landfills. We could have invested more in recycling infrastructures. We could have reduced our production of the plastics hardest to recycle. But we were denied those opportunities by deceit.

Deceit—along with denial and distraction—contributes to our emerging post-truth culture. A post-truth culture is one where facts lose their value, the pursuits of truth are undermined, and every truth-claim is chalked-up to someone's perspective.[7] Post-truth is defending an idea that is demonstrably false without concern for facts. More than deception, it is willful ignorance and disregard for the truth. Post-truth is shamelessly touting something we know to be untrue and *just don't care*. Post-truth is all the evidence pointing to a suspect's innocence and the jury deciding he just *seems* guilty. Post-truth is all the evidence pointing to human-caused changing climate and still deciding it doesn't *feel possible*. When we choose easy feelings and disregard truths inconvenient to us, the false peace we cultivate always comes at the expense of some neighbor.

> *When we choose easy feelings and disregard truths inconvenient to us, the false peace we cultivate always comes at the expense of some neighbor.*

Without a commitment to pursuing and telling the truth, we lose the ability to live well together. Society has no common ground, no basis for relationship, conversation, trust, or decision-making. We talk past one another, rather than with one another. We become polarized and conflict erupts. We look at one another with suspicion, doubt one another's intentions, words, and actions. We presume the worst. When we cannot trust one another, we isolate ourselves, build walls around our hearts, our homes, and our nation.

The trouble is that those in power benefit from a post-truth environment, at least in the short term. It allows them to peddle false realities handcrafted to

perpetuate their own authority. It allows them to manipulate the public with appeals to emotion, to make us trust their self-serving versions of reality rather than the true shared reality we inhabit together. But eventually, false realities and the deceits that create them always fall apart: the emperor has no clothes. But cracking the illusion of a false reality requires that we—like the little girl in the story who boldly declared the naked fact of the foolish and deceived emperor—commit to telling the truth.

Truth-Telling as Faithful Resistance and Practical Hope

How should we live, then, in the face of powers that deceive and divide us? To what forms of resistance should people of integrity commit in the face of temptations to distract and deceive even ourselves? I have proposed that we begin by telling the truth—to ourselves, to one another, and to power. Now, in this section, we look more closely at truth-telling: what it is, how it is a form of faithful resistance and practical hope for a world of peace and wholeness, and where we can find examples of this kind of truth-telling in the Christian tradition.

What Is Truth-Telling?   Over 2,300 years ago, Aristotle defined truth-telling this way: "to say of what is that it is and of what is not that it is not, is true" (1011b25). He is pointing to a kind of correspondence between *reality* (what is) and what we *say*. He was a wise one, that Aristotle, but truth-telling is about more than words. It is also about actions and relationships— how we live, what we stand for, what we love.
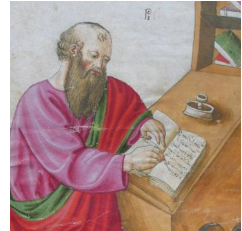
Aristotle

For our purposes, let's define *truth-telling* as the practice of living in a way that reflects and responds to reality, even when it is hard, and faithfully resists the powers that deceive. Truth-telling is faithful resistance to every power that would seek to deceive, divide, and disorient us. It is faithful resistance to everything in and around us that would distract us from the good work of cultivating common ground, community, and a more just, humane, and peaceful world. Since truth-telling contributes to this good work, it is also a form of practical, lived hope for a better future.

Telling the truth entails more than not lying. We tell the truth when our lives—our words, deeds, and relationships—reflect and respond to what is real. When our neighbor suffers, a truth-teller acknowledges the reality of this suffering and responds with good medicine—whether companionship,

compassion, or advocacy. When the earth stuns us with beauty and goodness, a truth-teller's life erupts in joy and gratitude. Truth-tellers are honest about the reality of the world *as it is* (faithful resistance to deception about the world) and invest in the world *as it can be* (practical hope).

And it can be hard. For one thing, telling the truth is hard because *knowing* the truth can be hard. Scientists spend their working lives discerning nature's patterns and discovering the sources and trajectories of everything from viruses to cosmic light. Philosophers and theologians pursue truths borne by ancestral testimony and wisdom, truths revealed by love and poured out in suffering. Yet the best among such truth-seekers readily admit their "learned ignorance"—their awareness of how much they do not know.[8] Such humility is itself a form of truthfulness.

Truthfulness as the Trustworthy Ground of Peace   Truthfulness always matters, but the stakes are high in a time of transition. One of the important tasks of a social transition is to take stock of our shared reality and to articulate who we want to be in the future. Doing that work together requires trust and the cultivation of a shared vision of the future, each of which is possible only when we commit to pursuing and practicing truthfulness.

Truthfulness always matters, but the stakes are high in a time of transition.

Truth-telling is an invitation to trust, even across differences in experience. When we speak honestly and listen to one another with humility and openness, we build trust across differences, not based on identical experience, but on the basis of neighborly hospitality, which is itself sacred common ground. Speaking truthfully, we invite one another to inhabit the world of experience that we ourselves trust and inhabit. (Deceit, on the other hand, invites someone into a world we know to be false.) In this way, truth-telling builds trust, which is the prerequisite for life together in community.

Truth-telling is the basis of *shalom*. *Shalom* is a biblical concept often translated as peace, though the meaning is far richer. *Shalom* is a communal state of well-being rooted in trust, justice, wholeness, and health. Theologian Jürgen Moltmann puts it plainly: "Truth creates trust and trust creates peace, and without peace, life is not possible." *Shalom* is not a private or merely spiritual peace, Native theologian Randy Woodley reminds us: "The whole community must have shalom or no one has shalom. As long

as there are hungry people in a community that is well fed, there can be no shalom. Shalom is not for the many, while a few suffer; nor is it for the few while many suffer" (21). *Shalom* is not an impossible utopian vision, but the shared reality God intends and desires for creation.

Truth-telling honors this reality. For Christians, one of the deepest realities is that the world itself is God's good creation. The world is saturated with God's presence, sustained by God's love, and oriented toward God's desire for *shalom*—here as in heaven. All reality runs toward this peace. All fleeting moments of shared reality prepare for the joy of *this* shared reality. Truth-telling is a form of faithful resistance to all that would undermine God's desire for the *shalom* of creation.

Exemplars of Truth-Telling as Resistance and Hope　　　　Throughout the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, we find examples of truth-telling as faithful resistance and practical hope. When the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness, God gave them the law (Torah) to guide them in building a humane, just, and peaceful world. As the Jewish tradition reminds us, "The entire Torah is for the sake of the way of shalom" (Gittin 59b qtd. in Woodley 11, n. 6).[9] In the Torah, one of the ten commandments prohibits bearing false witness—that is, giving false testimony against one another in court. This commandment is, as biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann writes, "a simple requirement that neighbors not distort shared reality" and a reminder that "reality is not an innocent product of *power*" (71). When we tell the truth, we resist those forces that would put reality up for grabs to the highest bidder. Telling the truth, we honor shared reality and hold it in sacred trust with our neighbors. Truth-telling is faithfulness to God's law and to our neighbors whose welfare is entrusted to us and bound to the same reality as our own.

The prophets of the Old Testament also spoke hard truths as an act of faithful resistance and practical hope. In a time in which the inhabitants of Judah had fallen into self-deception, prophets like Isaiah called the people back into right relationship with God. They called the people to face reality: while they were busy fasting and offering showy sacrifices to God, they were also bickering among themselves and oppressing their own workers (Isa. 58.3-5). The prophets called the people back to their grounding reality: the God who had brought them out of Egypt and through the wilderness, the

When we tell the truth, we resist those forces that would put reality up for grabs to the highest bidder.

God who had made a true and trustworthy covenant with them, the God who is rightly worshiped by releasing the bonds of injustice, letting the oppressed go free, feeding the hungry, and welcoming the homeless (58.6-7). In short, the prophets told the hard truth: true worship is practicing *shalom*—everything else is a distraction.

A prophet speaks truth to power.

The prophets also spoke truth to power. While kings hired false prophets to tell them what they wanted to hear (the ancient world's version of confirmation bias!), true prophets told the hard truths that no one wanted to hear: "the Lord is about to lay waste the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants" (*NRSV* Isa. 24.1). But the prophets didn't merely warn, they connected the dots from truth to consequence: "the earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers. . . . The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated statues, broken the everlasting covenant" (24.5). The hard truth is this, says the prophet: our relationship with earth and with God are part of the same shared reality.

At the center of the Christian faith is a mystery: in Jesus, God entered into the shared reality of creation and human life. This is the meaning of the incarnation. Born as a vulnerable baby, God entered into our world of shared experience: a world of friendship and finitude, of beauty and brokenness, joy and suffering. In Jesus, God shared our reality in order to forge common ground and make peace with us for the sake of the whole creation. Trusting this, we can dare to speak honestly about reality, including the realities of suffering, injustice, and our participation in them.

When we tell the truth—to ourselves, to one another, and to power—we can take courage from those faithful truth-tellers who have gone before us.

Practices for Truth-Tellers

In an era in the throes of transition into post-truth, living out a commitment to truth-telling takes both courage and community. Here are some practices that I have learned from others along the way for practicing truth-telling as an act of faithful resistance and practical hope.

First, faithful resistance requires that we rest from the constant barrage of deceit and distraction. Go outside without your phone. At least once a day, immerse yourself in the world unmediated by words and images. Creation itself is our bedrock shared reality. Soils and rivers, trees and rocks, oceans and all-surrounding atmosphere: this is our literal common ground. According to Jewish and Christian Scripture, God calls this shared reality *good*.[10] Together with other creatures, human beings inhabit this good place as our "common home," our shared reality (Pope Francis). Here, we share the reality of our *humanness*, our life as creatures who are both finite and free, both dust and glory. So, touch the ground. Listen to the leaves rustling in the trees. Rest in the peace of the unmediated real.

Our relationship with earth and with God are part of the same shared reality.

Second, adopt a practice of self-reflection that allows you to seek the truth about yourself. Perhaps you need to hear the truth of your own beauty and dignity in resistance to the harmful untruths you have received elsewhere. Or perhaps you need to speak the hard truth of your own weaknesses—a propensity for self-distraction or the ways you deceive yourself. Whether in relationship with a friend, in a faith community, or in your own journal, establish a practice that allows you to hold yourself accountable to both hard and affirming truths. For me, this is best done in community. I belong to a faith community where, each week, we confess together the ways we have fallen short of God's vision of *shalom*. Then, together, we receive the persistent truth of God's forgiveness and love. Speaking these hard truths and receiving the truth of mercy frees me for the week ahead.

Third, in your own media consumption, try to get out of your own echo chamber. Subscribe to a source outside your own cultural and religious background. Friend the local mosque or a local organization supporting immigrants on Facebook so that you can follow the news through their eyes. Whatever you are reading or viewing, employ tools of critical analysis. In other words, ask questions of what you see and read in order to unmask the hidden powers and agendas behind truth-claims. When I read something and wonder about its angle, I ask myself *who benefits* from this interpretation of reality? Which empire is bolstered by this claim? Then, I also ask the corollary: *who doesn't benefit?* Whose testimony is silenced and whose wellbeing is thwarted by this interpretation of reality?

Fourth, commit to holding those in power accountable to shared reality. Whether in ballots or direct action, with your money or your pen, insist that our leaders and those wielding great power over our shared reality tell the truth. Get inspired for this work by listening to brave truth-tellers like Greta Thunberg and Brian Stevenson who, in their own areas of passion and expertise, work to

Protestors demand truth.

set the record straight on behalf of justice and ecological flourishing.[11] Their witness can inspire our own commitment to speaking and living the truth, even in the face of powerful denials.

Finally, commit to telling the truth to one another and to building trust and common ground with those with different lived experiences. Talk to your neighbors. Make friends with people of other faith traditions, languages, cultures, and life experiences. Travel abroad, if opportunity arises. While power will seek to divide (and so to conquer) us with distortions, truth-telling builds trust and relationship. For example, as our international politics become more precarious, my family has committed to video-chatting with our friends in Iran more regularly. Together, we are building trust and shared reality between our daughters and teaching them the way of peace (*salaam*, in Arabic).

Conclusion

Someday I will tell my daughter the whole truth. I will tell her about moving her broken headband to the garbage and how I hoped she wouldn't see. Perhaps we will laugh about it, and I will apologize for this and all the other mistakes I have made as a parent. As she grows up, I will invite her more

Living out a commitment to truth-telling takes both courage and community.

fully into the many hard and beautiful realities of our world and I will journey with her as she discovers others for herself. We will talk about the allures of deceit and the hope I believe is found only in honesty about reality.

Who knows? Perhaps by living as truth-tellers in matters big and small, she and I will walk together—with you and all our neighbors near and far—into a new shared reality built on the firm foundation of trust, humanity, justice, and peace. Until then, let truth-telling be our act of faithful resistance

against all that would deceive and divide us. Let truth-telling be our act of hope for our world.

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Image "An Old Prophet Denounces the Proceedings at a Lavish Sacrifice" p. 63: Science Museum Group, United Kingdom, CC BY 4.0, creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/, lightened
Photo credit "Flashmob for Truth" p. 65: Master Steve Rapport, CC By 2.0, creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/, lightened

Notes

[1] The story of the plastic industry's profitable deceit is told in the PBS Frontline documentary, *Plastic Wars*, which premiered March 31, 2020, bringing this issue into public consciousness. To hear the whole story, stream the documentary at www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/plastic-wars.

[2] The Tobacco industry wrote the playbook for public deceit when they denied what they knew to be true: smoking is hazardous to your health. Since then, other industries—including the fossil fuel industry—have followed their lead. To learn more about these profitable deceits, I recommend Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway's *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*, also available as a documentary.

[3] A study of Twitter trends shows that false stories spread six times faster—and significantly wider—than true news. For an accessible account of this MIT study, see "The Spread of True and False News Online" by Vosoughi et al.

[4] It was Sean Spicer, then White House Press Secretary, who lied about the size of the 2017 inauguration crowd: see Hunt, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/22/trump-inauguration-crowd-sean-spicers-claims-versus-the-evidence. On the editing of crowd photos to manufacture a sense of a robust crowd, see Swaine, www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/06/donald-trump-inauguration-crowd-size-

photos-edited.

[5] NASA maps the rise in global surface temperature from 1884-2020 here: "Global Temperature," climate.nasa.gov/vital-signs/global-temperature/. To learn more about human displacement that is caused by climate change I recommend the work of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: see "Climate Change and Disaster Displacement," www.unhcr.org/en-us/climate-change-and-disasters.html.

[6] On shared reality and its role in human life, see, E. Tory Higgins' *Shared Reality: What Makes Us Strong and Tears Us Apart*.

[7] "Post-truth" was named the 2016's word of the year, according to the Oxford Dictionaries. To learn more about the emerging concept of post-truth, I recommend Lee McIntyre's *Post-Truth*.

[8] Augustine of Hippo (d. 430) spoke of the importance of "learned ignorance" (*docta ignorantia*, in Latin) as a gift of the Holy Spirit to those who humbly pursue knowledge of God, but it was Nicolas of Cusa who made the term famous in his 1440 essay, *On Learned Ignorance*.

[9] The Torah—which means the *teachings* or *law of God*—includes the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, which Christians also hold as sacred Scripture. The quote in Woodley comes from a set of Jewish teachings called the Talmud, Gittin 59b.

[10] God declares the goodness of creation in Genesis 1-2.4a.

[11] To learn more about the work of Brian Stevenson and the Equal Justice Initiative, see: justmercy.eji.org/. Hear climate activist Greta Thunberg testify about the reality of climate change to world leaders during the 2019 United Nations Climate Action Summit, at the age of 16, here: www.npr.org/2019/09/23/763452863/transcript-greta-thunbergs-speech-at-the-u-n-climate-action-summit.

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Navigating Transitions with Intention and Resilience

Rick Olsen

My daughter, whom I love deeply, was a very headstrong first-born child. She wore us out even as she lit up a room (and still does) with her smile and energy. As young parents, we barely hung on and actually decided to sell all the baby stuff when she was two years old . . . only to find out a few months later we were pregnant again. Life is full of planned—and unplanned—transitions! Ironically, our second child, a son, was mellow, played independently, and went to sleep rather easily.

As one might imagine with such diverse children, the disciplinary encounters went quite differently. My daughter wanted most infractions to be argued before the Supreme Court. My son put himself in timeout without us even knowing what he'd concluded he'd done wrong.

One day my daughter brought stern attention to her observation that "Caleb never gets in trouble and you are always yelling at me but not him!" I took a breath and decided on the following plan. We went to the garage and I got an empty aluminum can and foam cup from our recycling bin. I then got a hammer and board. I put the can and cup on the board and gave her the hammer. I asked her to flatten each one as best she could. The cup flattened with the first hit and she finished with just a few additional taps. Then she tried the can. Not so easy. I encouraged her to (safely) swing harder. A few dents but nothing like the cup.

"Which one is you, and which one is Caleb?" I gently asked as she paused in frustration.

After a long pause she answered somberly as she looked down at the board. "I'm the can and Caleb is the cup. . . ." Yep. We followed up the object lesson with a good talk about how parents try to help shape their kids' character

and that Mommy and Daddy can get frustrated too, just like my daughter did with the can.

What does a story like this have to do with *Character and . . . Transitions*? I will highlight two connections: First, we are all in process. We are all simultaneously formed and in formation. She was right, I was a parent who yelled too much, yet who was also trying to be and become a great dad. She was a strong-willed child figuring out her best self as a five-year-old. Second, change is inevitable and navigating change well requires intention. Intentional responses

No such thing as "one-size-fits-all" in character formation

to change help us see *transitions* in what might otherwise seem vague, ambiguous, hostile, or random. My goal in the encounter was not to *change* my daughter, but to help her grow toward excellence in her character.

I will begin by defining some key terms. Next, I will explore two commonalities and connections across the four articles in this issue. Third, I will have a brief "conversation" with each article and author. Finally, I will offer what I hope is a useful "so what" after our engagement with issues above.

Defining Some Key Terms

The title of this issue of the journal provides two of the three key concepts. The first is *character*. According to the Wendt website, "Character is about excellence. It is not just about being excellent in one area, such as in one's profession, or in one's personal life, or even in one's religious devotion. It's about being excellent as a whole human being" (Ebertz). There is a lot to like in this definition in that it transcends mere expertise in a given skill set or sphere of life. I would push further that character is as much about being open to growth and transition as meeting a fixed measure of excellence. Many tragic figures from great literature and films draw their nobility of character from their striving, regardless of whether they succeed as intended. Good character manifests in the striving.

The second concept is *transitions*. Transitions seems a simple term, but there are several definitions and dimensions. It can be both a noun ("Fix this transition on page three."), or a verb ("He transitioned from high school to

college well."), or even an adjective ("We are in a transitional phase"). What seems to make *transition* distinct from mere *change* is a greater sense of intention or at least awareness. Ideally there is also a sense of purpose or *telos*. *Telos* is an ancient term that refers to the ultimate purpose or inherent purpose of something. The Westminster Catechism asserts that the ultimate purpose of humanity is to worship God and enjoy God forever. That is a powerful teleological statement. Articulation of an ultimate end or purpose can help us navigate transitions as we seek to become people of excellence.

The final concept I will define briefly as a catalyst for creatively navigating transitions. The Community Resiliency Model (CRM) is a holistic approach for fostering resilience in response to trauma. It "trains community

> *Character is as much about being open to growth and transition as meeting a fixed measure of excellence.*

members to not only help themselves but to help others within their wider social network. The primary focus of this skills-based, stabilization program is to re-set the natural balance of the nervous system" ("Community Model"). A key goal of CRM is to help individuals and communities respond to trauma by making intentional transitions toward their desired future.

I imagine you might be saying that "not every transition is traumatic" and that is true. Some are eagerly anticipated. But invoking this toolkit does help us look with fresh eyes at both mundane and significant transitions, even if they are not traumatic. And many of us can attest that even anticipated and positive transitions, like marriage and fatherhood, can come with unexpected stressors and challenges where tools like CRM can be helpful.[1]

Two Uniting Themes

This collection of essays is diverse in subject matter and approaches. Nevertheless, there are two themes that inform them as a whole. The first is the timelessness of the challenge of transition.

Whether it is the personal transition of helping a child leave the nest or the seemingly limitless and more ethereal challenge of living in a world of algorithms, we have actually wrestled with versions of these transitions before. The very definition of family has changed over time as we transitioned from a predominantly agrarian society with family farms, through the industrial revolution, and then into an information age and

technological age where, for the most part, children are told to explore and find their own hobbies, sports, goals, and professions. The navigation of dependence, interdependence, and independence has been a challenge for families through every era.

Even in the challenges of the internet, we see footsteps from previous explorers. Plato called on his students to be wary of the shadow casters who presented a false but compelling "reality" on the walls of the cave

Plato's allegory of the cave

(Gendler). Those shadows are now cast on screens not caves and the fires are tended more by algorithms and bots than by humans. But the struggles transcend time and space: What is truth? Who am I? What is my purpose? Changes in culture, institutions, and technology may influence our answers or even how we go about seeking our answers, but the challenges are timeless.

The second unifying theme is the intersection of continuity and discontinuity within transitions. All transitions have elements of both. Yet many transitions emphasize one or the other. We cannot invoke amnesia about the past in order to transition from it. We need intentional transitions that emphasize discontinuity in order to move forward. Steve Jobs actually performed a "funeral" for a very successful operating system as a means of respectfully breaking free from the limitations of OS 9. The innovations he planned were not an update, but a re-envisioning ("Apple").

Other transitions are actually intended to foster continuity. My stepmother would tell the "miracle birth story" at each birthday celebration of her oldest daughter. There was both change (you are now a year older) and continuity (you have been a miracle and a fighter your whole life and we want that to continue).

These larger themes provide our first connection with the Community Resilience Model. CRM is a set of skills designed to minimize the negative effects of trauma on people and communities. To transition in life is to navigate both continuity and discontinuity. We emphasize discontinuity when we assert "I am not my past." Yet we might later leverage a negative experience as a source of power during a transition: "I have survived the hurricane. I can survive this." While not every significant transition is

traumatic, successfully navigating transitions of any kind requires awareness and intention.

"Conversations" with the Essays

Three of the essays align in interesting ways with the three contexts for trauma within CRM: family/personal, community, and environmental. For example, a divorce or food insecurity are family traumas. Community gun violence or an underfunded school system would be a community trauma. Hurricanes and heat waves are examples of environmental trauma. Following this progression we will first engage the family transition offered by Jeffrey Haverland followed by the communities formed within sports teams in the essay by James Romagna. Third, I will treat technology as an environmental factor (Thitivesa) as we explore the insights by Ann Mauss on algorithms. We will conclude with Mary Emily Briehl Duba's fine work that transcends all three areas. By using this CRM lens to engage each article I hope we see new and creative ways to navigate transitions even when they are not traumatic.

To transition in life is to navigate both continuity and discontinuity.

Liminality, Gratitude, and Resilience   Haverland offers many insights on how to respond to liminality. I was struck by the following: "Life is not perfect, and we often get lost in trying to make it so" (16). When we are in a liminal phase of life, we delay learning and growth if we attempt to control our circumstances rather than ourselves. The irony is that such efforts to minimize the discomfort may actually extend the discomfort. That is one reason to embrace liminality. There is another that ties back to my first common theme: we are all in transitions.

My university has a lifelong learning program for community members who are over 50 years of age. Most members are 65 or older, vibrant, curious, and opinionated. I was invited to speak at a fall kick-off event and my theme was we are *all* "tweenagers." While that concept has a very specific definition to advertisers and marketers, I reminded them that I had never been 47 before and they had never been 63 or 72 or whatever their age before either. And maybe they had just become grandparents or retired or moved. There is an undercurrent of liminality to all of life that rises like a gust of wind at times to highlight more significant transitions in our lives.

There is a "mirror" concept to liminality that further illuminates the challenges Haverland shares with his readers. The term is *relational dialectics* ("Relational Dialectics"). While it sounds complicated, it simply means that every relationship (such as Dad and Jack) has imbedded tensions that must be intentionally managed. Researchers have identified three universal tensions: Autonomy and connection, stability and change, and expression and nonexpression.

Dad and Jack wrestle with their ongoing challenges of staying connected while embracing the greater independence of college. They also process memories that show a desire for stability but also share excitement for the coming changes. Finally, we see a high level of openness and expression, but we can easily imagine that not everything each of them is feeling has been expressed. Perhaps Dad holds back sharing feelings that could make Jack feel guilty for leaving. Perhaps Jack holds back excitement that seems insensitive to Dad's struggles as well.

While relational dialectics help to clarify Dad and Jack's challenges, there are two important differences between dialectics and liminality. First liminality is characterized by "neither this nor that" and is the ambiguity of the in-between. Dialectics is characterized by "both this and that." Second, liminality is primarily chronological. It is grounded in a specific time.

The liminality of graduation

Graduation is liminal. No one wants to stay in that cap and gown forever. It is a temporary transitional state as one moves from college student to college graduate. Dad and Jack are intentionally navigating a transition in their relationship. But their newly defined relationship will require the ongoing and intentional management of dialectics' three universal tensions.

CRM provides a series of questions for resiliency counselors to ask (*Community Resiliency Activity Booklet*). One is "Who or what is helping you the most now?" The goal is to move the focus from negativity to the resources and active role a person has in creating their desired future. Haverland's account shows how gratitude can be one such resource: "Even amid our darkest liminal moments, gratitude will illuminate the blessings in our lives. Through gratitude, we have hope of uttering appreciation contrary to the circumstances in our lives and finding joy in unintended places"

(18). The intentional invocation of gratitude fosters resilience and frees us to pursue our desired future.

Ritual, Routine, and Memory   When we think of "the human condition," most of us do not think in biological terms. We tend to think in social terms: relationships, social events, heartache and triumph. With the social comes the semiotic and the cultural. We live in a world of meanings, and rituals are essential for managing such a world.

Romagna illuminates the power of ritual within the world of sports and that is quite fitting. Professor of Classics David Sansone has actually defined sport as ". . . the ritual sacrifice of physical energy" (D'Evelyn). The essence of this bold claim is seen most clearly in amateur competitions where the outcomes are primarily symbolic: pride, trophies, and adoration

Crowds applaud the effort.

of the crowd. And because the crowd is witnessing sport for the "ritual sacrifice of physical energy," they can cheer for the loser or even the wide receiver who *almost* makes the catch. They applaud the effort—the expense of energy on behalf of the team and game.

Having defined sport itself as ritual, we can more easily see the importance of ritual within sports. Anthropologist Eric Rothenbuhler defines ritual as "the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life" (27). His emphasis on symbol (meaning) and the serious life offers important points of distinction between ritual and routine.

A routine is adopted primarily for practical significance not symbolic significance. For example, coaching legend John Wooden of UCLA taught his players what he called the "UCLA Fold." Early athletic socks were known as "tube socks" and had a very squared-off toe, leaving excess fabric because the outside toes are shorter. He and his coaching staff had their athletes systematically fold the sock over the top of the foot to minimize potential for blisters. It was a practical habit, but Wooden also used this routine to express higher values of preparation, attention to detail, and the confidence that comes from such efforts. He also created a comprehensive Pyramid

of Success that connects character with high performance ("Pyramid of Success").

Key for both Rothenbuhler and Romagna is the notion of "the serious life"—a life of self-within-community, a life of intentionality. In his summary of the impact of the "hot seat" ritual, Romagna concludes that "This is a moment of self-reflection: Who do I think I am? Who do others think I am? Who really am I? The pivotal moment is the ritual, but the most important moment is the one that follows, as that is the moment with the potential for actual transformation" (35). These questions connect directly back to the definition of character above—excellence in all things.

Ritual provides the symbolic space for transformation, and is often the act that formally changes someone from a teammate to a captain or from a groom to a husband. But it does not make them an effective captain or a good husband. The ritual is the symbolic catalyst for such transformation. It gives permission to the self to embrace the new identity more easily and more fully.

It also gives the community permission to transition. The community is brought to reflection as well: Not just "who is she?" but "who are we?" Like ritual, CRM is grounded in community. There is an aspect of ritual that requires a witness. Whether we are rising to the challenge of athletic competition or becoming an Eagle Scout or volunteer fire fighter, a key source of our transformation and of our resilience is found in the community of which we are a part. So if I could add a sixth item to Romagna's helpful list it would be:

Like ritual, CRM is grounded in community.

6) Bear Witness. Model and teach the value of bearing witness. Help everyone feel the value of participation—as the central figure or as the witness. Both are transformed from the experience and both can help one another through the transformation.

Digital Climate Change   Technology is a tool. But it can also be usefully understood as an environmental factor. We see this when we talk of the "digital divide" between those who have adequate access to digital resources and those who do not—much like those who have clean water and those who do not. CRM takes into account sources of trauma that originate within the family, the community, and the environment. And often the environmental challenges are the most universal. Such is the case with algorithms and artificial intelligence as explored by Mauss.

Mauss notes that "Unregulated A.I. is the greatest existential crisis humanity faces today. Computers permeate every facet of our societies, and because they are no longer confined to one physical machine, data and algorithms can persist forever. We need to consider all of this before ceding our thinking to them" (51). Similar statements have been offered about climate change. Both are having an impact "everywhere" and will not be resolved without massive collective responses that go against many short term interests. Thus her call for virtue is not mere idealism but a necessary precursor for the work to be done.

But how are algorithms and A.I. and technology part of our environment and not simply our toolbox? If we understand environment to be the surrounding conditions *within which* we operate, then we can better see how our technology often functions as an environmental

Her call for virtue is not mere idealism but a necessary precursor for the work to be done.

feature. We live within a mediated world that is often created and curated for us by algorithms. They function invisibly and therefore "naturally." Our mediated reality is experienced just as we experience other environmental features of gravity and light. While we each access certain environmental features more than others—swimmers find the water, hikers find the trails, and gamers find the screens—we did not create the water, we did not clear the trail, we did not code the game.

While drafting this essay, I received an e-mail from a vendor promising to show me how to use A.I. in my college admissions process. Their webinar summary promised the following:

- Answers to your long-standing questions about using AI or machine learning in your admissions, enrollment, and student success functions

- How to define a data-first culture and how you can begin to lay the foundation to create a data-first culture

- How AI and data help you understand your students better and make more informed decisions in your role (Inside Higher Ed)

I am confident that the architects of this software would make the case that they are removing human bias and "bad moods" and "late afternoon crashes" from the selection process and making the selection of students and distribution of financial aid more objective. After all, I can use their software to build a "data-first culture."

But Mauss replies to such claims in her conclusion: "We need to look at the data these algorithms use, how they address any bias in this data, and how they come up with answers. By becoming a more virtuous society and providing proper oversight, we can develop an A.I. that reflects back the values we want to see" (51). This is more easily accomplished for the objective categorical data like income and demographics, but far more challenging if we ask A.I. to analyze college application essays. Could the sentiment analysis discussed by Mauss keep up with the nuanced evolutions of language used by the typical and—perhaps more importantly—the atypical high school seniors applying to colleges?

In CRM one of the questions used to foster resiliency is "When you have experienced other difficult times in your life, who or what helped you get through?" Participants are encouraged to reflect on previous hardships and how they overcame them through resources and relationships. Human history is littered with tragedies and misuses of technologies, but we have also seen cooperative acts as well: The Paris Accord, the elimination of land mines, and Geneva Convention laws and protocols. The UN was created in response to the (then new) reality that the tools and reach of humanity were now global in scale. Perhaps there are similar initiatives in our future that will emphasize the dignity of our humanity over the power of our technology.

Geneva Conventions signing in 1949

Truth, Faith, Hope, and Resilience   We have now tracked transitions through family, community, and the environment of the internet. Duba raises questions and solutions that permeate and transcend all three.

While it may be true that we live in a "post-truth" era, most major religions assert that the heart is the greatest of deceitful things and the hardest journeys are inward. So, something else is going on. I suggest it is the scale and reach of deceptive individuals, ideas, and institutions. When conspiracy theories were promoted primarily by shouting on street corners and handing out flyers, the reach and harm was minimal. Now a fringe group can have global reach, often for less than it cost to print the paper flyers. The deceit of pornography was once limited to shops on the "wrong side of town" but is now ubiquitous across the internet. Reach is a challenge. So is the issue of permanence.

Plato was fearful of writing because, even after a written argument has been refuted, the record of that erroneous argument does not go away; in fact it is left unchanged by the refutation. Many deceptive and factually incorrect ideas are permanently archived and advocated on the internet: flat earth, chip implants, stolen elections, the Denver airport is an alien portal, and many, many more. Duba astutely notes: "Deceit, denial, and distraction allow us to take shelter from hard truths in alternative realities built of 'alternative facts'" (58). It can be easier to believe totalizing lies than engage in the critical thinking that good character and responsible citizenship require.

Duba's key solution is truth-telling "to ourselves, to one another, and to power" (56, 60, 63). I can easily support such a call, but critical thinking is harder than it sounds! We must overcome personal biases, cultural biases (both are often unconscious), selective perceptions, limited knowledge, confirmation bias and more. And we also must realize that our desire for certainty—that we have "the truth"—can actually further inhibit our search for truth! There are also different kinds of truths. Phew! Let's unpack this challenge a bit more.

It can be easier to believe totalizing lies than engage in the critical thinking that good character and responsible citizenship require.

Some truths are about "the world as it is." Truth and truth-telling become matters of correspondence or alignment with the way things "really are." Examples: the laws of gravity and how much to feed the cat each day so she stays healthy. Other "truths" are grounded in consensus or agreement rather than alignment. Stop signs work through common agreement. How best to celebrate a significant birthday is grounded in agreement.

Being "truthful" then begins with discerning what kind of truths we are exploring. And when we are exploring physical reality, we invoke the critical thinking rules for exploring such reality. Our current best set of rules is given the label *science*. But even the strongest proponents of science would say their conclusions merely represent their best current understanding. For metaphysical reality we have disciplines like philosophy and theology and we invoke their standards as appropriate.

When exploring personal perceptions and preferences, being "truthful" means being honest and humble and expressing our position as our own.

> Truth-telling is an invitation to trust, even across differences in experience. When we speak honestly and listen to one another with humility and openness, we build trust across differences, not based on identical experience, but on the basis of neighborly hospitality, which is itself sacred common ground. (Duba 61)

We can say "this is my experience and this is my current understanding" and also be open to the experience of others that may change and refine that understanding. Even when we may not be able to land on a fixed or permanent truth, we can strive for transparency.

A key principle within CRM is "grounding." When someone is sharing a difficult story of trauma or transition, we want to make sure they feel physically stable: children should sit on furniture that allows their feet to touch the ground, for example. Counselors will ask if someone would like some water and ask if the water is cool enough to ground participants in their immediate physical surroundings. Duba's essay reminds us there are other forms of grounding: Truth, faith, hope can be sources of grounding. They are resources for intentional acts of resistance to the instability brought by self-deception and deception within larger systems of family, communities, and more. Resilience and resistance require effort and intention. Knowing how we are grounded can help with such effort.

Conclusion

Quentin Schultze insightfully frames human communication as symbolic stewardship (Schultze). It is the intentional management of words, images, sounds, and signs. Likewise, CRM is designed to focus all

One of the most powerful speech acts one can engage in is to ask good questions.

participants on stewarding their resources to transition toward the desired future. How can we use what we have to get us where we want? Being intentional about our path is essential when navigating transitions.

Communication is among the most powerful resources we have in order to co-create our desired future. It is fundamental to how relationships are built and maintained, how our communities gain their collective stories, how truths and ideals are advocated, and how our perceptions are clarified and

tested. And one of the most powerful speech acts one can engage in is to ask good questions.

The authors in this collection offer declarations of truth to power, loving affirmations of self and others, and formal and ritualized communication that invokes core values. The application of CRM to these examples emphasizes the power of communication in the form of key questions— questions that focus our attention on the right things: our virtue, self-awareness, resiliency, and resources. I conclude with one of the more powerful questions CRM encourages us to ask: "When did you know you'd be OK?" With any transition, even a joyful one, there is uncertainty. This question allows us to focus on when that uncertainty felt manageable and perhaps even thrilling! This is a powerful way to encourage a "resiliency pause" that reframes the transitions with *us*—not the *circumstances*—at the center of the story. It is an important question for all of us as we look to build and express our character in transitions.

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Notes

[1] Another reason for invoking the CRM frame is that creativity experts use "exaggerate the problem" (or the solution) as a technique for fostering more innovative solutions. For example, what if "going off to college" was forever? How might it foster preparation strategies that one might not otherwise think of?

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