A NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP:
DREAMING THE IMPOSSIBLE

by

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Abstract

Drawing on hermeneutic, phenomenological and postmodern theory, this inquiry was undertaken to explore the thinking, experience and significance of leading from a relational, socially-aware and dialogical perspective. Four women and three men participated in eight individual semi-structured interviews, three teleconferences and an electronic discussion group and journal, over a period of five months. The narrative approach supported a close reading of the participants' stories, which led to the identification of three primary storylines: Other, Otherness and Othering; Human’s Being; and Dreaming the Impossible. The first storyline encompassed the participants’ experiences with influential leaders and the practices they embodied. The participants described ways-of-being they identified with and emulated, to varying degrees, highlighting the way such exemplars had shaped their own practice. Various ways that the participants explored being rather than doing comprised the second storyline. Reflexivity (self and critical) heightened the participants’ receptiveness to the phenomenal world and deepened their appreciation for how we are always selves-in-relation-to-others. The notion of leadership as something aspirational rather than fully realizable emerged in the third storyline as participants grappled with their learning about leading and leader practice. Throughout the storylines, participants reflexively contemplated the practices that enabled them to maintain a socially-aware perspective. These practices encompassed such aspects as respecting, engaging and listening to others, seeking outcomes that reflect the priorities of others, holding the tension of
“chaosmic” perspectives and deconstructing the master narratives about what it means to lead. The inquiry itself was a space for reframing our conceptions of social science with a focus on freedom, consciousness and responsibility for others.

In terms of the significance of this inquiry, the study offers evidence of a growing shift from an objectivist and positivist framing of leading and leader practice, toward a view that is more generative, relational, open and human. Focusing on the reflexive development of leaderly capacity, the study fosters a deconstructive urge to open up texts, relationships and ideas to their verdant possibilities. This questioning and intersubjective stance enables the leader to fully participate in and co-construct a world held in common.
Preface

The research for this dissertation was undertaken collaboratively with co-researcher and Ph.D. student, Penny Lane. Collectively, we recruited the study participants and designed and conducted the research process. The inquiry was five months long and included semi-structured interviews, teleconferences, an online discussion forum and electronic journal. The inquiry findings and write-up of the dissertation were completed independently. The University of British Columbia (Okanagan) Behavioural Research Ethics Board granted ethics approval for this research with certificate number H13-02972.
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Dedication

I extend my heartfelt appreciation to all of my family, as well as the friends and colleagues who have encouraged and supported me. I dedicate this work to my husband, Art Bonney and my mother, Catherine Griffiths, who offered direct support and assistance in ongoing ways and at significant junctures of this long dissertation journey. It is difficult to imagine completing this project without your love and encouragement. I am especially grateful to my children Jessica and Jamie who remind me of the endless play of possibility in humans being and becoming.
Introduction

The subject of leadership has been of interest to scholars and practitioners for hundreds of years. It is arguably the most talked about issue in business and organizations and is commonly attributed as the cause of our most pressing and challenging contemporary issues. Leaders and leadership development have become common parlance in organizations and corporations spend millions of dollars attempting to address what is perceived as a leadership gap. In tandem with this growing interest in leadership, business schools and management faculties are experiencing exponential growth in student enrolment, particularly at the graduate level (Bolden et al. 2011). Despite this activity, there is no generally accepted definition of leadership and no agreement on how best to develop leaders.

Alongside this recognition of the importance of leadership is a populist notion that leadership is easy, that it can be abstracted into bytes and rendered comprehensible in five easy steps. The proliferation of leader biographies in airport bookstores attests to this, as does the growing number of books that offer research on how to do leadership. This explosion of bestsellers suggests that there is a thriving market for finding an answer to the conundrum of leadership. Much of this literature is formulaic, exemplifying leaders and leadership as clusters of discrete characteristics that can “fuel” or “drive” innovation through specific techniques and tools. While there is a bewildering multiplicity of theorizing on leaders and of leadership there is little contemporary theory that offers practical ways to conceptualize leadership that is inherently moral and relational.
Why this Study?

In this dissertation, I explore the idea of leadership as processual, not as a unitary and heroic act, but rather as a holding of space for meaning making and dialogue with others, an ideal to aspire to rather than actions to realize. As a leader practitioner and a student of leadership, I recognize that not only is there room for more current ways of conceiving of leadership, but also that there is a radical need for leaders to be different in the world. At this writing, there is strife between Russia and Ukraine, and the Arab Spring is considered by many to have failed even in the countries that were most hopeful: Libya, Yemen and Tunisia. Syria continues to haemorrhage the blood of civil war. ISIS/ISIL holds territory in both Iraq and Syria and is increasingly a skilled, networked terrorist power, raping women and taking them as slaves, beheading journalists and aid workers. In April of 2014, the Boko Haram kidnapped almost 300 girls for the crime of attending school. Currently, 57 have managed to escape but despite ubiquitous coverage and outrage, not one of the remaining 219 girls has been found. The Ebola outbreak in West Africa is defying containment and is considered the deadliest viral outbreak yet seen globally. The world is looking to the West to provide resources and leadership but do not necessarily share the Western values that accompany aid. Robert Fowler, the journalist who, in 2008, spent 130 days in Mali captured by Al Qaeda, succinctly articulates why Western efforts may be too little and too late:
It is a time of ruthless beheadings – and ill-conceived responses. Many Western commentators seem confident that the atrocious behaviour of the Islamic State is certain to build, legitimize and strengthen the anti-IS coalition, while weakening the authority of the IS itself. Such thinking, though, reeks of Western bias. What is reasonable or viable or even rational to us may not be, indeed is likely not, how the IS sees it; and, I’m afraid, not how many others in the world will see it, particularly throughout much of the Muslim ummah. [Fowler 2014]

These are dark times and wicked problems.

According to Keith Grint (2005), a wicked problem is one that has no precedent. Such problems are complex rather than complicated and they resist unilinear solutions. In many cases, one solution may generate further problems and, rather than right or wrong answers, there are simply alternatives that are better or worse. Grint stresses the high degree of uncertainty involved in such problems and proposes that they require leadership of the novel rather than management of the known. Robert Fowler’s (2014) quote suggests that currently we are confronted by wicked problems: problems that challenge us to review our assumptions, our biases and our strongly held values and principles. They are problems without precedent.

Leaderly practice is always more challenging in turbulent times but the unique problems currently facing the world call for leadership that is grounded in a self–world fusion where boundaries between self and other are porous (Ochs and Capps 1996). It is this level of increasing complexity in leadership, in tandem with a public crisis of confidence in leaders, that has led me to want to understand how some leaders are able to hold a high degree of social awareness placing human concerns as primary in their decision making. I am particularly interested in the part that the self-narrative plays in forming a leader’s deep passion and caring about “other.” And, I wonder what practices contribute to these understandings and reflections.
This research takes practice, rather than abstractions, as its starting point, with the assumption that leaders are involved in taking action in the world. My thesis is that leadership can be relational with leaders as situated, agents-in-the-world engaged in practical activities (Merleau-Ponty 1962) and constructing with others the kind of world in which they want to live. Given this ontology, it seemed important to take into account that leaders are always “in media res,” always already in the middle of things (Fischer and Bidell 1998) making sense of their contexts in dialogical engagement with others. The aim of my inquiry is not to explain why leaders see others and care about fairness, dignity and equality in any explicit, final or objective way, but rather to engage in dialogue about experiences, behaviours and perceptions as a means to understanding more relational forms of leadership. This research is enacted with a strong belief that interpretation “goes all the way down.”

Today, leaders find themselves attempting to work with others in situations of increasing complexity, unpredictability and uncertainty. Despite this, the vast majority of leadership models, processes and tools reflect a simpler environment where an individual leader can effect change through a sequential set of techniques. Much of the current literature detailing leader behaviours and characteristics is still entrenched in these individualistic conceptions. Such notions portray leadership as the property of the individual leader as demonstrated by their traits, behaviours and values. This perspective severs the leader and leadership from the social, historical and cultural context in which leadership occurs.
As I considered the current state of leader development in relationship to the complex challenges that leaders are currently trying to understand, I began to question the models that portray leadership as hierarchical, formulaic and simplistic. I believed that the complex issues we face globally require a kind of leader practice that is deeply concerned and aware of its impact on others and the world. It seemed that there might be much to learn through attending to leadership as a dialogical and inherently moral way of being in relationship to others. Jackson and Parry postulate that, “there are broadly five ways that one can go about studying leadership. You can actually attempt to lead, you can observe leadership in action, you can talk about leadership, you can read about it and you can write about it” (2008:3). As a result, much of the literature on leaders and leadership is based on the latter three domains. This method of inquiry often yields a backward-glancing perspective that may preclude the novel from emerging and may lead to normative decontextualized prescriptions for behaviour.

According to Bolden et al. (2011) there are substantial calls for the reframing of how we study leaders. In accordance with this thinking, it seems that there is an opportunity to study leaders and leadership in a less individualistic way, through stories and through collectively discovering meanings about leading in relationally- and socially-aware ways. As a leader practitioner and a student of leadership, I recognize that not only is there room for more current ways of conceiving of leadership, but that there is also a radical need for leaders to be different in the world.
My own somewhat ambiguous connection with leadership began a long time ago. I would characterize myself as a reluctant leader. While I am fascinated by the subject matter and have spent the better part of my career studying and engaging others in the leadership conversation, I have often been exasperated and appalled by how seemingly collaborative processes have ended in predetermined outcomes. Such processes generated cynicism in me, leaving me feeling both unheard and undervalued. In retrospect, it occurred to me that much of what was being positioned as innovative was really the same old tired solutions veiled by new jargon. A colleague once referred to these camouflages as “lipstick on the pig.” My reluctance to lead stemmed from the dissonance I felt between the espoused perspectives about how to lead and my actual experience of leading. It seemed to me that there were powerful narratives about leadership at play, narratives that permitted the expression of only certain kinds of leadership. While the terms that are used to characterize leaders are often collaborative, leaders are most frequently encouraged, rewarded and remunerated based on their individual contributions. This created, for me, a kind of internal incoherence or disconnect as I grappled with expectations to work collaboratively, while gaining success in achieving my own solitary objectives. Scratch the surface of this narrative and the modern conception of self appears … monological, disengaged, first-person-singular.

In addition to this dissonance, the objectivist posture of much of the leadership literature left me feeling unsettled. Its prescriptive stance did not fit with my experience of being-in-the-world. As a senior leader, an organization development professional and an executive coach, leadership theory and practice have been a
central aspect of the work that I have done for over 25 years. I believe there is a great hunger for leadership and a need, as laid out by Mats Alvesson and Stefan Sveningsson (2003), for a radical dissecting of traditional theoretical and methodological assumptions. This call to dissect historical perspectives in light of sweeping changes in philosophies, values and narratives led me to think that there was much to be learned from studying leadership from the standpoint of relationality embedded in stories and practices.

A Relational Ontology

In undertaking this inquiry I was influenced by a constellation of dynamic theories that focus on a more collective and collaborative way of practising leadership (Burns 1978; Greenleaf 1977; Kotter 1990; Senge 1990; Kouzes and Posner 1995). These theories are offered not as an exhaustive view of relevant theory but more as foregrounding threads of interest and awareness of less individualistic perspectives of leaders and leadership. For example, I was curious about theories that describe a leadership that is neither heroic nor sequential but firmly rooted in culture, history and context. These include existential leadership (Ashman 2007; Lawler 2005; Ashman and Lawler 2008), dialogic leadership (Salgado and Clegg 2011), relational leadership (Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011; Uhl-Bien 2006), and philosophic leadership (Cunliffe 2009). Each of these articulates a kind of leadership that is more congruent with my own experience as a leader in the world. They demonstrate how leadership transpires in everyday experience and in practical and embedded ways, highlighting the social processes that occur as leaders and others construct their realities in relation to each other. This more relational perspective on leadership requires a
deeper understanding of all social experience as intersubjective and therefore, leadership “as a way-of-being-in-relationship-to-others” (Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011:1430). Each of these theories expounds a hermeneutic phenomenological expression of leadership rooted in the contextual and day-to-day being of leaders. The hermeneutic perspective is fundamentally interpretive and seeks to highlight that our experience in the world is always already full of meaning. Hermeneutic research helps to bring to light our lived experiences and their resulting meanings. From this perspective, I began to understand leaders and leadership not as disembodied traits, characteristics and steps, but rather as social practices embedded in webs of significance (Geertz 1973) and interdependency, where the primary means of relating is conversational.

Curiously, the concept of the “great man” still prospers in many of today’s organizations. This raised many questions for me, such as why does the postmodern organization still reward and recognize a very modern style of leading? Why does heroic leadership continue to be valued even when evidence of autocratic decision making points to simple decisions inadequate to solve human issues of great complexity? Why is it that leaders who are seen to confer with others and to value plurality are often viewed as indecisive? Although research on leaders and leadership (as stated previously) is voluminous, it seems there remains a need to explore the micro narrative, the petite histoire of leaders who have the courage to confront differing values, cultures, perspectives and belief systems. It appears that there is a need to study leaders who are open to the incoming of the other (Caputo
and to consider the personal and social meanings that illuminate the abundant possibilities for leading relationally.

Sallyann Roth, in her thought-provoking meditation, *An Uncertain Path to Dialogue* (1999), suggests that collaboratively inquiring into meaning is an invitation to "experience the sense of human connectedness and shared responsibility that comes from allowing ourselves to wonder, to not understand, to participate in the repersonalization of the generalized and the objectified, to open up space for the future, now-being-realized world, the world that we create together" (93).

**Further Positioning**

Social constructionism provides another scaffold I use to enter into this inquiry. That is, I understand meanings of leading and leadership as derived from being a function of social interaction. Social constructionism is not concerned with identifying universal truths as an outcome of research, but rather as an orientation that fosters reflexivity and dialogue. Within social constructionism, language as a representation of reality is replaced by an understanding that language is constitutive. Our social realities and identities are created in dialogical and relational processes (Watson 1995; Shotter 1997; Shotter and Cunliffe 2002).

According to Kenneth and Mary Gergen (1997) there is no one theory of social construction, just as there is no prescribed constructionist methods or practices. Conversely, social constructionism is concerned with the collaborative constitution of meaning nested in cultural, political, historical and ethical dimensions of knowledge generation. Constructionist research takes into account how meaning is constructed between participants and in dialogue with researchers as co-constructors and
meaning makers. Research that is influenced by social constructionism encompasses a critical questioning of institutional knowledge, an inquiry into how people achieve understanding and a destabilization of assumptions (Gergen 2009). Although without prescriptive methods, social constructionism highlights qualitative approaches such as participation, narration, discourse and polyvocality (Cunliffe et al. 2004). Relational social constructionism assumes that social reality is embedded within relationships and “takes as primary the nexus of relations, rather than focusing on discrete, abstracted phenomena” (Bradbury and Lichtenstein 2000:551). Social realities are created and maintained in conversation rather than in structures and are culturally, historically and linguistically influenced (Boje 1991; Cunliffe 2002; Deetz 1996; Shotter and Cunliffe 2002). Social constructionism, therefore, highlights the inconsistent and often incongruent aspects of the world and the challenging nature of how we explain what we experience.

Other theoretical work has conceptualized the life story or narrative as a means of rendering the complexity of life comprehensible. The term “leader,” in itself, is a classification that forms the basis for identity work. Maintaining a sense of self is a process in which leaders actively engage throughout their lives. Storytelling or narrative is the vehicle through which this sense making occurs. Narrative identity is socially constructed and influenced by culture and history but is also conceived in the weaving together of life events and selected plots. Narrative provides consistency and significance but is not fixed in that, it is always open to interpretation or reconfiguring. Narrative is the medium through which the “inherent temporality of being is expressed” (McNay 2000:85). It shapes identity and
articulates selfhood. Narrative is not the determiner of identity, but rather mediates its continuous configuration and reconfiguration (Ricoeur 1984; Taylor 1989; McNay 2000). The idea of a history or a narrative seems to be critical in making sense of the concept of self. “For we make sense of our lives by the kind of story that we can or cannot tell about it” (Dunne 1995:146). It is in this sense that we are giving an account of ourselves and in doing so become accountable to ourselves and to others.

Mikhail Bakhtin (1984, 1986) also offers an explicitly relational and dialogical conception of development in that we are always in the process of becoming. Bakhtin’s (1986) notion of the polyphonic novel develops the idea of the self as a continuously changing multiplicity of voices. Development is not seen as the emergence of an individual, but rather a story of persons in relation to other. The field of negotiating involves a community of voices that bring social norms, histories, cultural contexts and shared meanings. The dialogical self is based on the assumption of a social self, a plurality of standpoints: a polyphony of voices. Dialogism claims that the self and its sociocultural context are inseparable. The dialogical self is inextricably interdependent both socially and relationally while remaining unique. “Self is event, agency, and thus fundamentally unique as well as fundamentally embedded in a symbolic, material and sociocultural world” (Salgado and Clegg 2011:403). Dialogue is central to a way of being and opens each self to divergent perspectives. Mikhail Bakhtin describes this ontological schema thus:
To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life. [1984:293]

Experience takes on congruence, consistency and an aesthetic quality when a coalescence of meaning occurs across a life. Crites (1986) links the self-concept with narrative configuration and suggests that “the self is a kind of aesthetic construct, recollected in and with the life of experience in narrative fashion” (1986:162). Leaders grow through experience rather than by experience and create lives of meaning for themselves and others through the integration of their understandings. Leadership enacted in this way can emphasize the shared interests of people and the multiple stakeholders impacted by the decisions they make.

Alexander Astin and Helen Astin (2000) eloquently summarize this hope:

We believe that the value ends of leadership should be to enhance equity, social justice and the quality of life; to expand access and opportunity; to encourage respect for difference and diversity; to strengthen democracy, civic life, and civic responsibility; and to promote cultural enrichment, creative expression, intellectual honesty, the advancement of knowledge, and personal freedom coupled with social responsibility. [11]

Why Now?

The preceding theories have influenced this inquiry, as has my own significant interest in identity, story and meaning making. Today, messages fly at us fast and furious, underscoring that what is rewarded is the quick completion of tasks from the checklist, not the slow contemplation required for a deep understanding of what is most needed. Our present age has reduced knowledge to the status of information, the most surface and external kind of knowing. For information to become
knowledge and knowledge to become wisdom, information has to be internalized. In complex times, merely handing down the tried and true will not help us to be more ethical and moral leaders; for that, we need time, contemplation, practice and epiphany. Geoffrey Wolfe (2013) suggests that time and learning go together. In order to understand something complex we need to immerse ourselves in it. It is in deep contemplation we find our calling or, as Derrida (1976) would suggest, it is in deep contemplation that we respond to the vocativeness of things. I have been living many life narratives through the time I have been involved in this inquiry. I can trace more than a few lines of movement that have led me to the writing of this dissertation over the course of my life.

I must confess early on, to you the reader that I come to leadership as an “insider.” After more than 25 years of studying, being and doing leadership, I intimately know the language, the acronyms, the retreats and the rituals. I have studied solid theories of substance as well as had exposure to the popular and charismatic leadership du jour. More than once I have bowed my head and hoped that “this too shall pass.” It is from the inside that I will offer my observations and my critique. Somehow it seems fairer to kick at the walls from within rather than to throw rocks from without.

I also came to the practice of leadership early. I held my first formal leadership position as a manager in my mid-twenties. There were 30 managers at the time, only 3 were women and I was the youngest. Moreover, there were few role models for women in leadership and I learned about leader practice mainly from within the work I was doing. Fortunately, I had the characteristic confidence of the young and I was
passionate about the work I was doing. Relationships were critical to me as a means of making sense of the environment and of learning the narratives about what it meant to lead at that time and in that place. It was intuitive to me to lead from a place of relationality but I often felt that I needed to hide what was central to my way-of-being to appear more rational, certain and in control.

Paradoxically, not only was I learning to lead but my organizational role involved the development of other leaders. It seemed like many times I was espousing theories that I had yet to understand in any but the most superficial way. And there were lots of theories: management by objective, management by wandering around, situational leadership, total quality management, change leadership. It wasn’t until I read the *Fifth Discipline* by Peter Senge (1990) that I became aware of the concept of personal mastery. It was like a light was turned on. I was a long way yet from practising a kind of radical reflexivity but I was awakened to a way-of-being in relationship with others that was more thoughtful, more contemplative—a way-of-being that was consciously slower. I found a growing desire to practise in ways that held contemplation and conversation as the primary means of relating.

Still, it would be many years before I would feel secure enough to reveal who I am: a compassionate and collaborative person who enjoys thought-provoking questions and process rather than definitive answers. This *becoming* continues to require an ongoing effort of breaking free from sedimented and binary ways of being, into exploration and the discovery of more human ways of relating. My own development is finally and crucially about *being* and not *doing*. 
David Whyte summarizes this beautifully:

The rich flow of creativity, innovation and almost musical complexity we are looking for in a fulfilled work life cannot be reached by trying or working harder. The medium for the soul it seems must be the message. The river down which we raft is made up of the same substance as the great sea of our destination. An ever-moving first-hand engagement with life and with others that completes itself simply by being itself. [1994:298]

These are some of the entry points into a long journey: a respect for and a valuing of others, a desire to engage in a “world held in common” (Sokolowski 2000:152) and an understanding of social experience as emphasizing relationality, emergence and reflexive acts of meaning making.

Passage …

I have undertaken this inquiry not to develop a stable and expository theory, but rather to explore the stories of leaders as they make sense of themselves, of others and of the worlds they are co-creating. So much of leadership theory highlights extraordinary moments that it seemed important to me to capture the commonplace. It is in these mundane moments of living, listening and learning that real wisdom develops. The passages at the end of each section represent a transition to the next section. They also provide me with an opportunity to summarize and highlight reflexive moments that occurred for me throughout the writing of this text.

Before continuing, I offer additional commentary on the ordering of this text. In the Introduction, I review background theories that helped me to appreciate the varied aspects of the stories shared by the participants. These include some of the literature on narrative theory, although I have made a distinction between narrative theory in the Introduction and narrative methodology in Chapter One as a way of
delineating the lens or perspective from the method of sharing stories. In Chapter One, I have also included a section on the systems of the self as they relate to the major theoretical contexts of the modern and postmodern eras, not with the intent of “bucketing” or tidily separating these epochs, but rather as a means of contrasting different ways of thinking about the self. As well, I consider the history of leader development in order to illuminate a cultural movement away from viewing leaders as unitary entities. In Chapter Two, I turn to the narrative inquiry methods that I followed. In Chapter Three, I describe the leaders that participated in this study to give an overall sense of their stories against which the storylines presented in Chapter Four may be considered. Within the storylines, leadership emerges as a property of open and engaging dialogue that may occur when we respectfully listen to others, when we speculate with others about the kind of world we want to create and when we see the future as one of infinite possibilities. In the Conclusion, I consider the implications of the research findings with respect to the ongoing development of leaders as human’s being and becoming.

Throughout this study the term “leadership” refers to processes, practices and interactions that are fully embedded in the social world. My aim is to avoid simplifying and reducing complex and fragile phenomena (leadership) to a clear-cut entity (leaders). I comprehend development, particularly leader development, as an ongoing journey in an understanding of self and an awareness of self in relation to others. And I agree with Mats Alvesson and Stefan Sveningsson that
to understand what leadership is about means care about the vocabulary applied and respect for the contextual character of language and meaning. Such respect calls for intimacy in relation to the phenomenon under study and depth of understanding at the expense of abstraction, generalizability, and the artificial separation of theory and data. [2003:364]

In this inquiry, I am most interested in how tightly woven a leader's identity is with story and practice. I am interested in the affordance of memory to continually refresh and imbue the present with depth and meaning. And finally, I would add that how we see ourselves and how we see others, what we invite into being through our conversation, is how we will change the world.
Chapter One: Literature Review

The following review of relevant literature provides the conceptual and theoretical scaffolding for this inquiry. This chapter will explore the ways that self has been shaped through narrative theory: I will trace the thinking (traditional, modern, postmodern) that has influenced our collective sense of the Western self and will underline how a dialogical embodiment of self may transform how leaders engage self and others. In the first part of this chapter, I review the concept of the narrative self as a means of understanding the narrative structures or stories that underpin the identity of leaders. Further, I consider the social, historical and cultural influences that characterize our current concepts of self and highlight the epochs that have shaped the systems of the self. I explore various perspectives on leaders and leadership with a view to understanding what has been emphasized in the literature relative to other perspectives that have been underemphasized. Social constructionism, dialogue and existential hermeneutics are woven throughout the dissertation and the review of the literature. The following theories are not inclusive of all work relative to the above-mentioned bodies of literature but cover some of the frequently cited theoretical works.

The Narrative Theory of Self

Identity work, or the active process of forming a workable self-identity, is key to the development of a stable basis for engaging in social interactions with others (Alvesson 1996; Bolden et al. 2011). A processual account of identity would suggest
that identity is fluid, it is never fully established and that leaders can actively engage with its construction. In keeping with my research questions, it was important to understand the various ways in which leaders’ stories of identity influenced their behaviour in the world. To that end, it seemed critical to understand the identity narrative or the storied self. Such narratives are encompassing texts through which we interpret, construct and share ourselves. Narrative structure is used to organize events into diverse stories that link various events and situate life within a unified and understandable whole. According to Polkinghorne, self-narratives “are the basis of personal identity and self-understanding and they provide answers to the question, who am I?” (1991:135).

The concept of ordering a life through narrative spans many disciplines (Bruner 1990; MacIntyre 1981; Polkinghorne 1988; Sarbin 1986). Stories are the linguistic form in which the connectedness of the lived human experience is articulated. According to Bruner (1990), a given text is an analogue through which meaning is both being expressed and extracted. This implies a narrative difference between what is said and what is meant and highlights that there is no single way to ascertain the rightness or truth of a text. Interpretation is required when there is no way to verify the constituent elements that comprise the text. The events of a self-narrative must be constituted in relationship to the whole of the narrative. Charles Taylor explicates this principle:

We are trying to establish a reading for the whole text and for this we appeal to readings of its partial expressions; and yet because we are dealing with meaning, with making sense, where expressions only make sense or not in relation to others, the readings of partial expressions depend on those of others, and ultimately of the whole. [1979:28]
Self-narratives are highly influenced by context and susceptible to cultural, interpersonal and linguistic influences. They reflect possible lives and culturally acceptable narrative constructions. Language, culture and history inform the telling of the narrative and serve to structure the events of a life (Polanyi 1989; Bruner 2004; Polkinghorne 1988; Turner 1980; Gergen 2009). The past and future are continuously articulated, refined and remade; thus, we reinterpret the past to make sense of the present as occurrences happen. This weaving of the past remembered with the present imagined enables a whole self to emerge. The personal narrative is inherently sociological, cultural and intersubjective in nature and is constituted in relationship to others, to history and to culture (Mead 1934; Ezzy 1998). The life story is not the witness to objective events, but rather the perceptions and interpretations of events as expressed by the individual (Shamir and Eilam 2005; Sparrowe 2005).

The identity narrative is the primary form through which we make meaning and understand our experience. Sarbin (1986) proposes the narratory principle in which human beings interact, reason and perceive according to narrative structures. Polkinghorne suggests that humans find their own experiences as significant and understandable. Rather than an indistinguishable confusion of unstructured events, we perceive the stories of our lives as having meaning and coherence. Thus, “narrative is a meaning structure that organizes events and human actions into a whole, thereby attributing significance to individual actions and events according to their effect on the whole” (1988:18). These stories are the foundation of personal identity and self-awareness (Polkinghorne 1991:136). Scheibe (1986) suggests that
narrative self-conceptions are not static but continuously evolving over the course of a life. Narratives of self-identity are filled in and expanded upon by people in ways that are consistent with their particular culture and historical time. Building on this, Bruner (1997) posits that the self is not private, but rather constituted in the discourses of culture. The self evolves as we make meaning of the events of life.

Human agency directed toward focused action is an outcome of coherent and meaningful self-narration. Paul Ricoeur (1984) highlights the criticality of temporal continuity to self-identity. His conceptual examination of the narrative self recognizes the problem of time in relation to identity, particularly the notion of identity as having both consistency and permanence over time. As with Ricoeur, McAdams points to the need for “self” to achieve “temporal coherence” (1997:62) and looks to narrative as the chronological retelling of a story that negotiates identity (Czarniawska 1998; Brown and Humphreys 2006). Ricoeur (1984) exemplifies the social constructionist tradition in narrative theory and focuses on discourses and texts, while fully recognizing that interpretation is always formed by the interpreter (Gergen 1985; Berger and Luckmann 1966). The subjective nature of experience and interpretation is emphasized over the possibility of objective knowledge.

As culturally-embedded beings, we have a second nature that is exemplified by our habits and by our identifications. These dispositions and identifications demonstrate how we actively mould the kind of people we become. We make sense of life by configuring events into small plots that ultimately become part of a larger narrative where there is a beginning, middle and ending. Emplotment discloses the whole of a life so that events may be followed to their conclusion. “To understand the
story is to understand how and why the successive episodes led to this conclusion, which, far from being foreseeable, must finally be acceptable, as congruent with the episodes brought together by the story” (Ricoeur 1984:66-67).

In recounting how emplotment unifies the events of a life into a coherent narrative of individual identity, it is important to highlight the influence of culture on imaginative variation. According to Ricoeur, we construct our narrative identity through the selection and configuration of the events of our life in addition to the appropriation of other identities from fiction and history. These engage us in visioning alternative plotlines and stories. Ricoeur postulated that as for the narrative unity of a life, it must be seen as an unstable mixture of fabulation and actual experience. It is precisely because of the elusive character of real life that we need the help of fiction to organize life retrospectively, after the fact, prepared to take as provisional and open to revision any figure of emplotment borrowed from fiction or history. [1992:162]

It is also important to note that while we can select from provisional stories and alternate plotlines to build our identities and our character, the events of a life are not those of the novel. We are not authors of our lives, but rather narrators working with the ordinary vicissitudes of events and intentions, caught up in lives that are inextricably bound to the lives of others. As Ricoeur suggests, “whole sections of my life are part of the life history of others – of my parents, of my friends, my companions in work and in leisure” (1992:161). Others are a rich source for reconfiguring the narrative identity as well as people with whom our lives are entwined. Self and other are essentially linked through seeing the self as an “other.” Ricoeur describes this active process of self as both subject and object of emplotment through suggesting that the self is both the reader and the writer of
one’s own life. Ricoeur captures, in his hermeneutic philosophy, how the self is permeated by otherness and yet is still responsibly agentic.

It is the temporal dimension of self-identity that offers a way to move beyond the poststructural conceptions of self. Narrative identity is socially constructed and influenced by culture and history but it is also conceived in the weaving together of life events and selected plots. It provides consistency and significance to the instability of life but is always open to new interpretations.

Other scholars are concerned with the themes expressed through the identity narrative. They hold that our lives move toward or away from strongly-held values. This movement within moral space is primary to our life stories (Taylor 1989; Laitinen 2002). The claim is not that the self or identity is prior to morality, but rather the self is constituted through the taking of moral positions or stances (Calhoun 1991). Within this philosophy, the self is fundamentally entwined with temporality, the other and morality. Charles Taylor fought against the dualist tendency to separate cognition and action. According to Taylor, to be a person is to be more than the things that you do, it is more than agency, thus “to be a person in the full sense you have to be an agent with a sense of yourself as agent” (1989:257).

Taylor’s fundamental axiom is that to be human means to occupy moral space, for people to “have a sense of themselves in ethical space” (1995:59). Human beings act within moral frameworks that enable them to make qualitative evaluations of goods. Commitment to a higher-order good, according to Taylor, enables the self to situate itself, to formulate an identity and to build a framework within which to evaluate life circumstances.
For those with a strong commitment to such a good, what it means is that this above all others provides the landmarks for what they judge to be the direction of their lives. While they recognize a whole range of qualitative distinctions, while all of these involve strong evaluation, so they judge themselves and others by the degree they attain the goods concerned and admire or look down on people in function of this, nevertheless, the one highest good has a special place. It is orientation to this that comes closest to defining my identity. [1989:62-63]

In Taylor’s phrasing, these highest goods are known as “hypergoods” (1989:63). These are goods that are incomparably more important than other goods and create the stance from which other goods must be judged. While these constitutive goods are not the same for everyone, everyone has them. To act within a moral framework is to make moral discernments. These are constituted from a stance that enables us to make qualitative discriminations, a stance which justifies choices that are made in the moment and that orient future perspectives. Taylor (1989) postulates that we know who we are, only by knowing where we stand in relation to the good. He suggests that modern philosophical understandings of self often neglect the notion that humans try to make sense of their own lives.

Consciousness of self does not constitute full selfhood. Personal identity is more than just self-consciousness. Not only are we aware of ourselves but we also matter to ourselves.

My sense of myself is of a being who is growing and becoming. In the very nature of things this cannot be instantaneous. It is not only that I need time and many incidents to sort out what is relatively fixed and stable in my character, temperament and desires from what is variable and changing, though that is true. It is also that, as a being who grows and becomes, I can only know myself through the history of my maturations and regressions, over comings and defeats. My self-understanding necessarily has temporal depth and incorporates narrative. [1989:50]
For Taylor, narrative is an inescapable form of self-identity. Narrative provides the central medium for self-interpretation. Within narrative, inherent, unspoken and implied conceptions of the good can be made clear to ourselves and also to others. From an early age we are encouraged to see the interconnections between people, events, and the world in a particular way through narrative. Our narratives help form strong evaluations of what is good or right. These interpretations are both vertical and horizontal; they reflect what is of higher or lower ethical significance and are also structured across time. In Heideggerian fashion, Taylor suggests that we see ourselves as beings with a past that can be remembered, reconstructed and reinterpreted; as we project ourselves into the future, “we see the agent not primarily as the locus of representations but as engaged in practices, as a being who acts in and on a world” (1995:60). Our lives are unfolding stories that move closer to and further away from different strongly held goods and goals (Taylor 1989; Abbey 2004; Laitinen 2002). For Taylor, there is a close connection between the different conditions of identity.

One could put it this way: because we cannot but orient ourselves to the good, and thus determine our place relative to it and hence determine the direction of our lives, we must inescapably understand our lives in narrative form, as a ‘quest’. But one could perhaps start from another point: because we have to determine our place in relation to the good, therefore we cannot be without an orientation to it, and hence must see our life in story. From whatever direction, I see these conditions as the connected facets of the same reality, inescapable structural requirements of human agency. [1989:51-52]

Taylor suggests that as we live our lives we reconfigure and reconceive the moral maps that guide life in order to make sense of our movements in moral space. Narratives help us to make sense of shifts in our moral outlook and in our
conceptions of the good. Taylor believes that one of the functions of narrative is to help the self align seemingly disparate allegiances to goods within a life as a whole. Discrepancies that cause tensions in our self-identity, as well as those that point to a disintegration of identity across a life, can be made whole again through narrative. Laitinen (2002) sums up the functions of narrative in Taylor’s theory by proposing that narratives are an optional medium for articulating some of our implicit self-interpretations and strong evaluations. Narratives enable us to care about our lives as wholes and to interpret our movements in moral space.

Through these phenomenological and hermeneutic lenses we begin to understand the self-narrative as neither Cartesian reflexivity nor the structural analysis of language. Instead, the self emerges as ontology, “a prior and more originary notion, starting from our experience of being in the world and in time and proceeding from this ontological condition towards its expression in language” (Ricoeur 1984:53). The synthesis of experience through emplotment creates a unitary and singular life story that is grounded in morality through the expression of strong evaluations. Social and cultural interpretations of self create the particularities of self-identity. In this view, the self is both interpreter and interpreted. Douglas Ezzy suggests that “narrative identity is coherent but fluid and changeable, historically grounded but fictively reinterpreted, constructed by an individual but constructed in interaction and dialogue with other people” (1998:246). These perspectives pave the way for a more dialogical perspective of the self to emerge.
Systems of the Self

In this section I identify the broad religious, cultural and historical influences that have shaped how we conceive of the self. I outline four selves: a traditional view of the self as playing a significant role in the cosmic order (Taylor 1989); a modern conception of self as bounded and masterful (Cushman 1990), saturated (Gergen 1992), utilitarian (Bellah et al. 1985) and sovereign (Dunne 1995); a postmodern conception of self as a creation of language and social systems (Rorty 1982; Gergen 1985); and the notion of a storied or dialogical self (Taylor 1989, 1995; Dunne 1995; Richardson et al. 1998). Theories of the narrative self and the cultural and historical evolution of self are not discrete units, but rather follow a similar philosophical path in keeping with the events that have shaped our thinking.

The self as an artefact has different functions and configurations depending on the culture, history and socioeconomic class in which the self exists (Cushman 1990). According to Taylor, “the self is a modern phenomenon. Only in modern Western culture have we begun to speak of the human person as the self and of people as having and being selves” (1995:57). Taylor contends this modern conception of self as objective and rational reifies an essentially monological, disengaged, first-person-singular self. In this section of the literature review, I look at the evolution of thinking about self and end by advocating for a perspective on human agency that is comprehended as dialogical.
The Pre-modern or Traditional Self

The pre-modern Western worldview embodies a vision of life that exists on two distinct planes, the ordinary and the teleological (Geertz 1973; Taylor 1995; Richardson et al. 1998; Harrist and Richardson 2006). Human beings are essential elements in a meaningful cosmos. Life is viewed as the self playing a significant role in both the human community and in the cosmological order of things. Ordinary life was to be endured and transcended, an activity that required self-restraint and self-discipline and led to a higher form of existence (Richardson et al. 1998; Salgado and Clegg 2011). “People within the pre-modern or traditional society took for granted the notion that they belonged to an ordered world, a vision that was shared widely throughout their community” (Harrist and Richardson 2006:3).

This traditional view held that the self was born into hierarchical institutions, families, guilds and churches and was expected to fulfill the commitments required by those roles. The self was not differentiated between his or her social or religious order. What was considered significant was determined by the self’s place in society and the roles that supported it. Daily life consisted of following religious and ethical counsel in order to fulfill a role in the cosmos. Individual identity, individual desire and individual need were subjugated to a higher kind of existence achieved through effort and discipline. This state effectively provided the self with a sense of unity and coherence and rendered comprehensible the vagaries of daily existence. Self-identity was not an intellectual challenge in pre-modern times given that the human soul was considered to be the coherent condition that created continuity through time. Selves are selves precisely because they have a soul and the soul is part of
the higher cosmological order (Taylor 1989). According to Harrist and Richardson, “the upending of this sort of traditional vision of a meaningful cosmic order came about with the advent of the natural sciences and a metaphysical and moral outlook that gave science pride of place so far as both knowledge and practical life are concerned” (2006:3).

**The Modern Self**

In this section I turn to the evolution of modern thinking, specifically as it relates to the notion of the modern self. Although modern thinking coalesced around a new notion of human agency or consciousness in the scientific revolution during the 17th century (Rorty 1982; Taylor 1989; Richardson et al.1998; Salgado and Clegg 2011), it is still the most ubiquitous conception of the self. I would argue that the modern individual is vitally present in all our institutions and is at the disengaged core of our most common, insidious and omnipresent human issues.

For the purposes of this exploration of the conception of self, modernity will refer generally to the economic, political and cultural systems spawned by the Industrial Revolution in the 19th and 20th centuries. Additionally, it refers to the expansion of capitalism, the proliferation of markets and the dominance of both science and technology (McAdams 1997). The meaning of this new scientific conception was philosophically explicated by the Enlightenment thinkers. It represented a movement away from the self deriving meaning from its place in the cosmological order to a more scientific and materialist perspective (Richardson et al. 1998). The modern era was characterized by a faith in progress, optimism about the future, a focus on rationality in outlook and decision making, a search for absolute
knowledge or truth and a seeking for foundational knowledge of the true self.

According to Taylor, “the rationalist self-image and the occulting of moral motivation, is the dominant trend in Enlightenment naturalism” (1989:338).

This rationalist turn was catalyzed by a rebellion against perceived unthinking traditionalism and overarching authority. Cartesian philosophy was central to the rational concept of thought. Descartes held that he could doubt the existence of all things but not the act of doubt itself (Gergen 2009:100). The modern self held an objectified view of reality and perceived reality to be fundamentally known through reason, an external occurrence that may be charted and understood by empirical observation. Harrist and Richardson in their cogent discussion of liberal individualism postulate that

natural science operates by abstracting away from the particular and by sifting out bias and opinion from observable, replicable phenomena. By doing so, science regards the world in a somewhat detached and impersonal manner. In doing so, it treats the values, experiences, and meaningful relationships of ordinary life very differently than ever before. In this new order of things, experiences of beauty, relevance to our purposes, goodness, and so on, tend to be regarded as mere human preferences confined to a private, subjective realm. This kind of ‘subject-object ontology’, defines an outlook on the world that under-girds and shapes much of our modern view of life. [2006:3]

During this period, a great divide opened up between the self and the world, between the subject and the object (Richardson et al. 1998). According to Dunne (1995), this notion of the self was elucidated by Descartes as “I” or “ego.” This epistemology illustrates a sense of self that is pure consciousness without the influences of embodiment, language, culture or community. Taylor (1989) suggests that a modern sense of self is disengaged, capable of objectifying the surrounding world as well as its own internal emotions and fears. Such a distance enables the
self to act with “reason.” The modern self is disengaged, autonomous, rational and separate from both the social and the natural world.

In the political sphere, Thomas Hobbes (Richardson et al. 1998) sets forth a portrait of the naked self as a passionate centre of assertion motivated by egregious self-interest. Hobbes suggests that humans in their natural state prefer themselves over all others and are primarily motivated by gain to self. His conclusion was that human existence could only mean human pitted against other humans and called for the establishment of a strong central government to contain the humans’ brutish desires. According to Dunne, “the sovereign self … represents an idea with deep roots in modern philosophy, which, as an ideal, has permeated much of modern culture and perhaps, to a greater or lesser degree, has shaped the self-image of everyone now living in advanced industrial societies” (1995:137). While the philosophical perspectives of Descartes, Hobbes and others differ, combined they paint a portrait of the self that has instructive and predictive knowledge residing in a masterful and unassailable self. Dunne suggests this modern self “is a citadel in which lucid reason is at the service of a naked will” (1995:138).

Much of modern social inquiry attempts to describe phenomena in value-neutral descriptions and paints cultural, historic and moral values as subjective. Meaning making, values and integrity may be tainted and should be held at arm’s length (Richardson et al. 1998). Knowledge about human behaviour, its impacts and its outcomes, can be abstracted from its ends in an objectifying ontology (Dunne 1995). Such an approach seriously misrepresents and dehumanizes basic human concerns (Cushman 1990; Taylor 1989; Dunne 1995; Richardson et al. 1998;
Gergen 2009) and exacerbates fragmentation and emotional isolation. Taylor (1995) argues that the modern intellectual tradition has reified the first-person-singular self.

In modernity, the self is regarded as a reflexive project, which the individual shapes. Giddens (1991) posits that self-identity is a project that is sculpted like a work of art. Radical reflexivity (Taylor 1995) or expressive individualism (Bellah et al. 1985) is a crucial concept to understanding the post-romantic modern self. Practices of self-realization and self-actualization emerge to oppose the stances of scientific materialism, determinism and technology. This reflexivity uses cultural meanings to unblock and unfetter unique feelings and their expression. The self as a reflexive project involves examining the individual’s inner world where truth and meaning are discerned. Adams suggests that reflexivity, when conceived from an objective stance, relies on modernist assumptions. “A rationalist project implies a centered subject at the helm, overseeing a purposeful future trajectory … while on the one hand the world is dissolving into a malleable and open backdrop, the rational, choice-making, bounded individual remains, is expanded even, at the core of self-hood” (2003:224). As Taylor (1989) proposes, the modern skepticism of external moral authority makes the Shakespearean maxim, “to thine own self be true,” even more important. The expressive self champions and continues to reinforce the modern ideals of freedom, dignity, skepticism and tolerance (Bellah et al. 1985; Richardson et al. 1998). While such ideals promote freedom from the value-neutral objectifications of scientism and materialism, expressive individualism promotes a “freedom from” that may undermine its best values (Richardson et al. 1998). The modern instrumental self reduces the understanding of freedom to a matter of being
free from defining ties. With regard to interaction and relationship with the other, Dunne posits that

self-enclosure cannot be maintained if life is to be lived; action, which is at the same time, interaction and commerce with others is unavoidable. If ultimate self-sufficiency is impossible, the engagement with others implied by this possibility is tolerable, however, only if it involves no loss of self-ownership … I can never come to discover or realize myself in a new way through interaction with the other; for I am already securely given to myself as my self prior to the interaction and all that can be at stake in the latter is success or failure in realizing my antecedently established ends. [1995:139]

Within the premises of modern individualism, the self is the primary reality. If the self is devoted to self-expression, self-development and self-fulfillment, others become instrumental to achieving those ends. This utilitarian perspective challenges our social institutions and is detrimental to the viability of our society. Bellah et al. propose that “if love and marriage are seen primarily in terms of psychological gratification, they may fail to fulfill their older social function of providing people with stable, committed, relationships that tie them in to the larger society” (1985:85). On a final note, Gergen warns that the individualist option is simplistic and limited: “When the self is the essential atom of society, we find invitations to isolation, distrust, narcissism and competition; we find relationships reduced to manipulation and artifice; and we find a stunting simplification of the problems we confront” (2009:87).

The Postmodern or Decentred Self

The perspective on contemporary selfhood shifts significantly when we look to postmodern and poststructuralist streams of thought. The certainties of modernity, a faith in science and reason and assumptions regarding objectivity and identity are rigorously contested. Postmodernism is difficult to define and seems, at times, given to theoretical contradictions. It is variously described as both a buzzword (Hebdige
1988) and as a style distrustful of theories and ideologies (Anderson 1998).

According to Yilmaz (2010), there is no one definition that applies, but rather a multiplicity of definitions reflective of postmodernism itself. The term contains certain attributes and characteristics that can be agreed upon but there is no one specific definition. She suggests that the theory is anti-essentialist and anti-foundationalist and therefore unwilling to define itself in tangible terms. Postmodernism is characterized by the reversal of margin and centre and is most clearly understood by the contrasts that it highlights. The conception of postmodernism is not to be concretized or sedimented but to be fluid and unpredictable, much like the postmodern self (Rorty 1982; Gergen 1992).

If the modern self is a depiction of a stable centre “incorrigibly present to itself and negotiating with its surrounding world from within its own securely established powers of knowing and willing” (Dunne 1995:139), then the decentred self (Richardson et al. 1998) seriously challenges these premises by proposing that experiences are “linguistic constructions guided and shaped by historically contingent conventions of discourse” (Gergen 1985:267). While the modern self undermines the constitutive role of culture and society in the construction of self, the postmodern perspective suggests that the shared inheritances of language and culture construct the concepts accessible to our consciousness, including the notions of the sovereign or instrumental self. Postmodern, poststructuralist and social constructionist theories emphasize the role of language, history, culture and society in the formulation of ideas and beliefs. Social constructionism postulates that apparent realities are social constructions rather than individual conceptions of
reality. This perspective abandons the foundational epistemologies of enlightenment thinking and challenges the modern assumptions of self and identity as entities that can be discovered through self-actualization, much like an object in the natural world. These theories suggest that reality is a construction emanating from relational agreements and that narrative is the fundamental framework through which the world is rendered intelligible (Salgado and Clegg 2011). According to Crossley (2000), the social constructionist perspective of self is one that relies on language and linguistic structures to make sense of self and others.

The social constructionist commitment to deconstructing the self stems from an appreciation of the inextricable connection between linguistic structures and conceptions of self. This leads to an understanding of the self as a phenomenon characterized by interpretation, variability, relativity, flux and difference. [2000:529]

Unlike the modern, realist conceptions of the self, it is difficult, if not impossible, to make truth claims about the nature of the self and personal experiences if the self is an ephemeral construction of historical and cultural contexts.

Language enables continuous interpretation of the meaning of human actions in the service of aligning everyday activities with our current perspectives. These fluid and changing perspectives make the notion of a stable self, existing outside of intersubjectivity and interpretation, improbable. Dunne (1995) suggests that good philosophy highlighted the untenability of the Cartesian view of the self as immediately and transparently present to its own ideas. The notion of having a self must be abandoned if there is not a self to describe. Unlike modernity, the postmodern self is no longer identified as a stable centre of attitudes and perceptions articulated through reason. The identity of the postmodern self does not
have a centre, transparent and known to itself, but rather has a text that is "a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings blend and clash … not an object which stands by itself and which offers the same face to each observer in each period" (Sarup 1996:25). The inner world of the mind emerges from participation in the social world, within the process of relating. Judith Butler postulates that the self is only known intersubjectively and mediated by language, by convention and by a sedimentation of norms. The self is partial and in constant flux as it redefines itself in each interaction with the other.

I find that the only way to know myself is precisely through a mediation that takes place outside of me, exterior to me, in a convention or a norm that I did not make, in which I cannot discern myself as an author or an agent of its making. In this sense, then, the subject of recognition is one for whom a vacillation between loss and ecstasy is inevitable. The possibility of the 'I', of speaking and knowing the 'I', resides in a perspective that dislocates the first-person perspective whose very condition it supplies. [2001:23]

Crossley proposes that it is this lack of unity, the lack of an essential nature or a self to describe, that leads postmodern thinkers to declare the “death of the subject” (2000). Supporting this notion, Lovlie posits that the postmodernist “does not go for identity but for the manifold and equivocal” (1990:119). The postmodern self is set free from the static relationship between identity and social roles. This freedom is signified by a fluidity of meaning and the interplay of multiple roles.

The critical questioning of the master narratives of the modern Western world has greatly raised awareness of human rights, particularly with regard to issues of race, gender and sexuality. The existing institutions of education, religion, politics and domestic life are now widely regarded as without foundations and are potentially places and spaces of oppression (Butler and Scott 1992). Notions of instability,
fluidity, negotiation and flux have characterized recent conceptions of identity. These have been decried by some theorists as being weak, soft, clichéd constructions. According to Brubaker and Cooper, “these qualifiers have become so familiar—indeed obligatory—in recent years that one reads (and writes) them virtually automatically. They risk becoming mere place-holders, gestures signaling a stance rather than words conveying a meaning” (2000:11). Additionally, Robert Royal suggests that “merely undermining such institutions does not guarantee greater freedom and justice. Also, in a world where ethnic cleansing, political uses of famine and totalitarian regimes still exist, ironic undermining is a very weak weapon with which to pursue justice” (1997:93). In this sense, postmodern discourse has been seen as a “retreat from the investigation of core questions” (Abraham and Hampson 1996:226). Meaning and truth are the consequence of social articulation and are negotiated linguistically and socially. Within this framework there is a rejection of the inner sphere of selfhood. The inner world ceases to be private and is, instead, a construction of our social relationships. Thus

as self constructions cease to have an object (a real self) to which they refer, and one comes to see these constructions as means to getting on in the world, one’s hold on them is slowly relinquished. They slowly cease to be one’s private possessions. The invitation for one construction as opposed to another is, after all, issued from the social surrounds; and the fate of this construction is also determined by other persons. One’s role thus becomes that of participant in a social process that eclipses one’s personal being. [Gergen 1992:156]

The fragmented, deconstructed, partial and insubstantial self of postmodernism is left with little to evaluate personal philosophies and principles. Brubaker and Cooper assert that
the prevailing constructivist stance on identity—the attempt to ‘soften’ the term, to acquit it of the charge of ‘essentialism’ by stipulating that identities are constructed, fluid and multiple—leaves us without a rationale for talking about ‘identities’ at all and ill-equipped to examine the ‘hard’ dynamics and essentialist claims of contemporary identity politics. ‘Soft’ constructivism allows putative ‘identities’ to proliferate. But as they proliferate, the term loses its analytical purchase. If identity is everywhere, it is nowhere. [2000:1]

Gergen (1985) asserts that in the absence of objective truth, beliefs and values should be evaluated on the basis of their pragmatic implications. The use of the term “pragmatic” casts into doubt the notion that the postmodern self is really any different from the disengaged modern self, a self given to objectification, reasoning and self-focused pragmatism. Richardson et al. postulate that “what we take to be acting ethically or responsibly or decently is often the opposite of sheer pragmatism” (1998:503). Taylor suggests that the moral has “overriding force against the merely prudential” (1989:64). Dunne, in explicating the postmodern practice of deconstruction, suggests that it “engulfs, if not annihilates, the self” (1995:140). He goes on to propose that the “casualty list of this deconstructive project includes not just the self but truth and freedom too” (1995:143).

The Storied or Dialogical Self
Richardson et al. (1998) query whether there is an alternative to the three global systems of thinking about the self (traditional, modern and postmodern). The self, as dialogical narrator, has been outlined as an alternate option to traditionalism, modern individualism and the fragmented postmodern self (Hermans et al. 1992; Bakhtin 1981; Bruner 1986). This hermeneutic perspective, in alignment with postmodern thinking, postulates that we have no direct access to what might be considered a "real" world or universal norms independent of individual construal.
Truth claims are perceived as interpretations of interpretations forming an unending and circular path. Humans are self-interpreting beings (Taylor 1989; Dunne 1995) and hermeneutic thought conceives of human existence as a becoming, an acting in and on the world (Heidegger 1962). The self emerges as a social, cultural and historical construction within this new framework. Self-identity is formed within the social situation and through the negotiation of identity with others. In this view, language is a lived phenomenon, an actual event in the world, consequently the focus on the social dimension of language. Richardson et al. (1998) suggest that, rather than viewing language as a tool for describing an objectively existing world, we should think of it in the Heideggerian sense of language as the medium through which the world is made manifest to us.

Utterances or spoken words are events in the world that enable a person to engage in social relations (Bakhtin 1981; Salgado and Clegg 2011). An utterance is directed toward someone, hence meaning issues from the social relationship. The utterance is always dialogical. Salgado and Clegg posit that at each and every moment the person is confronting the world using words coming from and directed to others, always in a potentially polemic situation. If we were to portray the general human condition under this perspective, we would all be pictured in an unfinished chain of responses, through which every agent is united to others in a responsive dialogic relation. [2011:424]

The notion of dialogism reconceptualises the self and provides alternative ways of being that may lead away from the challenges of solipsism inherent in modernism and the relativism inherent in postmodernism. The following are six principles for dialogism proposed by Salgado and Clegg (2011) that are consistent with most of the current theorizing on the dialogical self (Richardson et al. 1998; Dunne 1995;
Taylor 1995; Salgado and Goncalves 2006; Salgado and Valsiner 2010; Salgado and Clegg 2011). These are the principles of relationality, dynamism, semiotic mediation, alterity, dialogicality and contextuality. Among these basic assumptions, relationality is considered axiomatic. Dialogism focuses on relations between elements rather than on entities (relationality). Dynamic relations are, in this context, the continuously changing nature of relationships, what Bakhtin (1984) would call an unfinished chain of responses between the person and the world (dynamism).

Relationality is meaningful only if there are distinguishable selves that can relate with one another. Being or existence intimates that there is a relationship between an ego and an alter (Markova 2003). Unlike the postmodern self, the dialogical self doesn’t disintegrate the person. Instead, the person is seen as agentic with a significant role in determining their thoughts and action. Within this context, relationality is articulated as a tangible relationship between human beings (alterity) based on sign exchanges (semiotic mediation). The ego or “I” meets the “other” through language creating a dialogical relationship (dialogicality). Ongoing meaning springs forth through communicative relations. The others in the dialogical relationship can be virtual or real. Hermans et al. speak to the imaginal quality of dialogue with self: “Even when we are outwardly silent, for example, we find ourselves communicating with our critics, our parents, our conscience, our gods, our reflection in the mirror, the photograph of someone we miss, a figure from a movie or a dream, our babies or our pets” (1992:28).

The field of negotiating involves a community of voices that bring social norms, histories, cultural contexts and shared meanings (contextuality). The dialogical self,
in direct contrast with the modern, individualistic self, is based on the assumption of
a social self, a multiplicity of “I” positions that can be occupied by the same person—
a person holding a multiplicity of perspectives embedded within a diversity of voices.
The self is continuously constructing a dynamic structure of “I” positions. These positions
are organized in an imaginal landscape. In this conception, the ‘I’ has the possibility to move, as in space, from one position to the other in accordance with changes in situation and time. The ‘I’ fluctuates among different, and even opposed, positions and has the capacity to imaginatively endow each position with a voice so that dialogical relations between characters in a story, are involved in a process of question and answer, agreement and disagreement. Each character has a story to tell about its own experiences from its own stance. [Hermans 1996:10]

I can construct another person as a position that I can then inhabit and that will open up to me alternate dialogical outlooks on the world. Hermans et al. express that the dialogical self is conceived as social—not in the sense that a self-contained individual enters into social interactions with other outside people, but in the sense that other people occupy positions in the multivoiced self. The self is not only ‘here’ but also ‘there’, and because of the power of imagination the person can act as if he or she were the other. [1992:29]

In dialogism, it is through communicative relations with the other that meaning is negotiated. The field of negotiating involves a community of voices that bring social norms, histories, cultural contexts and shared meanings (contextuality). This concept of self, contextualized by culture and history, coincides with Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of the half-given word. A word is half given because of our social, cultural and historical traditions and half created because we use it, in the moment of speaking, in a unique and personal way. Unlike the postmodernist perspective, contextualization does not invalidate the personal; rather, people create meaning by
positioning themselves within a given context. Dialogism claims that the self and its sociocultural context are inseparable. This differs from the concept of the bounded modern self as a totally separate agent and from the postmodern self as a transient social construction of identity. The dialogical self is inextricably interdependent both socially and relationally while remaining unique. The self is agentic, an event and thus unique, while still embedded in a symbolic, material and sociocultural world (Markova 2003; Richardson et al. 1998; Salgado and Clegg 2011).

The concept of the narrative elegantly summarizes the self as permeated by otherness while still a centre of agency. According to MacIntyre (1981), the unity of a life consists in its narrative embodiment. New understandings about who the self is and where it is headed are conceived through life story development. The dialogical self is the storied self and narrative, it seems, is integral to the notion of it. In giving an account of ourselves we become accountable. Dunne postulates that “if no account can be given of my life, it can scarcely be considered a human life” (1995:147). Richardson et al. beautifully summarize both the concept and the mercurial nature of the dialogical self:

In this view, our lives are enacted narratives, in contact and conversation with other lives of the same sort, present, imaginary and past. As compared with many fictional narratives, they are always open-ended, shot-through with accident, somewhat ambiguous and rough around the edges. Moreover they may be fragmented and confused rather than relatively coherent. But the idea of narrative allows us to capture the kind of coherence belonging to an engaged, partly decentered dialogical self. [1998:512]

Management and Leadership

In this section I will broadly trace the movement of the historical concepts of leadership development. I will not dwell on specific theories, but rather the broad
trends that have characterized research about leaders and leadership development. These movements are more particularly related to the philosophical assumptions of modernism, postmodernism, post-structuralism and beyond. I will articulate the movement away from studying management and toward the study of leaders and leadership and will endeavour to highlight some of the inconsistencies that plague the empirical studies of leadership. The intent of understanding the literature relative to the narrative self and the systems of the self is to highlight an understanding of leadership practice that is self-aware, relationally oriented and dialogically grounded.

The proverbial heyday for management theory was largely in the 1980s. At that time, the focus was on management rather than leadership, with a particular focus on management development, competencies and assessments. During the 1990s this trend was reversed with a decided downplaying of management as lacking in vision and having a predilection for dealing with minutiae rather than strategy (Bennis and Nanus 1985; Covey 1989). With tongue firmly in cheek, Stephen Covey recreates the zeitgeist of this period by describing the difference between managers and leaders.

You can quickly grasp the important difference between the two if you envision a group of producers cutting their way through the jungle with machetes. They’re the producers, the problem-solvers. They are cutting through the undergrowth, clearing it out. The managers are behind them, sharpening their machetes, writing policy and procedure manuals, holding muscle development programs, bringing in improved technologies and setting up working schedules and compensation programs for machete wielders. The leader is the one who climbs the tallest tree, surveys the entire situation and yells, “Wrong Jungle!” [1989:101]

Subsequently, many theorists have determined the differences between the role and function of the manager and the role and function of the leader.
Contemporary leadership literature is rife with statements that proclaim the distinction between the two (Kotter 1990; Bennis 1989; Covey 1989; Kouzes and Posner 1995; Maak and Pless 2006; Bolden et al. 2011). Gardner remarks that “many writers on leadership take considerable pains to distinguish between leaders and managers. In the process, leaders generally end up looking like a cross between Napoleon and The Pied Piper, and managers like unimaginative clods”(1993:3). John Kotter (1990), a sought-after leadership and change theorist, balances the two perspectives by suggesting that the purpose of management is to bring about stability and consistency through planning, budgeting, organizing, staffing, controlling and problem-solving. By contrast, he posits that the purview of leadership is setting clear direction, aligning people and processes and motivating and inspiring others to follow. Management is characterized as bringing about stability and sameness, while leadership is concerned with the dynamic processes of change.

Kotter and others (Day 2001; Yukl 1998), believe management and leadership to be complementary rather than oppositional, both bringing elements vital to the success of organizations.

Leadership is different from management but not for the reasons that most people think. Leadership isn’t mystical and mysterious. It has nothing to do with having ‘charisma’ or other exotic personality traits. It is not the province of the chosen few. Nor is leadership necessarily better than management or a replacement for it. Rather leadership and management are two distinctive complementary systems of action. Each has its own function and characteristic activities. Both are necessary for success in an increasingly complex and volatile business environment. [1990:103]

In contrast to the complementary view of management and leadership, critical social theorists began raising important questions about the ontological and
epistemological assumptions of management practice. According to Willmott, “silence about inequality, conflict, domination and subordination and manipulation” (1997:1330) are a catalyst to challenging more benign theories of management and organization. Critical theorists dispute the ideologies underpinning the notion of management and suggest that, instead of a focus on stability, management is actually focused on control, domination and surveillance (Barker and Cheney 1994; Townley 1994). Edwards suggests that bureaucratic control is “the primary strategy available to managers to control work effectively in the modern organization” (1981:410). Within this paradigm, management development was about replicating methods of control to produce morally neutral managers. Alasdair MacIntyre, in After Virtue, posits that the only predictable claim to be made about social life is that it is permanently unpredictable, therefore claims of managerial competence are false and reveal “will and preference” (1981:107).

Underlining this notion of will and preference rather than objectivity and rationality, Ezzamel et al. suggest that “a particular management strategy may be pursued not because managers have engaged in an economically rational calculation … but because they have invested in and become wedded to, a particular ideology or recipe of management practices” (2001:1056). It was this rote or formulaic approach that catalyzed the move away from management theory and practice, to the theory and practice of leaders and leadership.

While Kotter accurately named the increasingly complex, capricious and unpredictable business milieu, his explication of management was largely uncritical and his theory of leadership rested in attributes, characteristics and qualities that are
abstracted from the context of day-to-day life. Such leadership theories portray a
discrete individual leader who masters problems and challenges with techniques and
strategies. The frameworks that attend these theories attempt to capture a static
version of a one-dimensional business environment. Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011)
suggest that while these frameworks are useful in offering a scaffold for reflecting on
leadership experiences, they do little to help leaders grapple with complexity in situ.

It could be argued that defining leadership, pinning it down to a single
definition, is less than helpful. In a cogent discussion of the challenges of definition,
Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) suggest that the degree of diversity that the term
leadership is intended to represent is so broad as to be almost meaningless. In
attempting to refer to this phenomenon in ways that have meaning for leaders in the
field, many theorists have relied on illuminating behaviours, leadership styles and
personality assessments. Modern organizations are notoriously susceptible to
rationalization, objectification and quantification. These attempts at standardizing a
nonlinear concept have led to a radical simplification of the concept and practice of
leadership. Some theorists reject the quantification of social phenomena as a
distortion of social reality (Deetz 1996; Alvesson and Sveningsson 2003; Alvesson
and Deetz 2000) through imposing order and certainty on an open and uncertain
concept. Alvesson and Sveningsson posit that a movement toward homogeneity and
coherence in defining leadership “is not practically possible, would not be very
helpful if it were, does not hit the target and may also obstruct new ideas and
interesting ways of thinking” (2003:362). They also speculate that “a coherent
definition with universal aspirations may tell us relatively little in terms of the richness and complexity of the phenomena to which it supposedly refers” (2003:363).

The confusion surrounding the topic of leadership may be related to the ever-growing schism between the normative objectivist discourse, foundational in many contemporary organizations, and the growing awareness among leaders of the need to understand and encourage plurality, multiplicity, diversity and dialogue (Deetz 1996; Alvesson and Deetz 2000; Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011). Sumantra Ghoshal (2005) suggests that poor management and leadership practices emanate from decades of management and leadership education founded on amoral theories. Ghoshal posits that, in disseminating such theories, “business schools have actively freed their students from any sense of moral responsibility” (2005:76). He goes on to articulate the dangerous pattern of a double hermeneutic that can characterize the connection between theory and practice within the social sphere. In the natural sciences, bad theory is simply bad theory. In the social sciences, bad theory can lead to poor practice. “Whether right or wrong to begin with, the theory can become right as managers—who are both its subjects and the consumers—adapt their behaviour to conform with the doctrine” (2005:77). Ghoshal elegantly explicates the “why” of such scandals as Enron and demonstrates that theories advocating business solely as a means of wealth creation for shareholders create leaders who exist as rational self-interest maximizers. As with John Stuart Mill and others, he refers to such leaders as “Homo Economicus” (2005:82) and concludes by stating that “the only alternative to any form of intellectual absolutism lies in intellectual pluralism” (2005:88).
The modern industrialized world has transformed into a postmodern, postindustrial, globally-linked world system. To address these profound changes, new and developing theories of socially-aware leadership have emerged (Maak and Pless 2006; Westley et al. 2006; Ospina and Foldy 2010). These theories are rooted in broader frameworks about the nature of reality and knowledge production. They focus on the importance of relationality, contextuality and language in the being of leadership. Alvesson and Sveningsson suggest that to understand what leadership is about means care about the vocabulary applied and respect for the contextual character of language and meaning. Such respect calls for intimacy in relation to the phenomena under study and depth of understanding at the expense of abstraction, generalizability, and the artificial separation of theory and data. [2003:364]

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) suggest that the social world is organized and constructed by our interpretations that are formed intersubjectively. Hatch and Cunliffe further propose that “intersubjectivity is that realm of subjective experience occurring between people that produces a sense of shared history and culture” (2013:34). Such premises are less about the applying of theory, models and know-how and more about understanding social experience as emphasizing relational, emerging and reflexive acts of meaning making. According to Ashman and Lawler (2008), intersubjectivity is the thing that enables us to know the other and to place the other in our life world. The concept of intersubjectivity is defined in words that are recognizable to all—compassion, empathy, reciprocity, understanding, consideration and connectedness. It is what enables us to appreciate the situation of the other. Cunliffe conjectures that “from this relationally responsive perspective, we are always engaged in meaning making because as we live our
lives, we are continually making sense of what is happening around us and who we are in our daily interactions and conversations” (2003:488). We emerge our understanding of self, other and the world through relationally responsive interactions characterized by a complex fusion of our own and others words and actions (Bakhtin 1986; Ricoeur 1992).

Older leadership theories focused on leader–follower relationships have been supplanted by newer theories focused on the space in between the leader and the other (Bradbury and Lichtenstein 2000; Ospina and Foldy 2010). The space in between suggests that leadership is not about a leader’s traits, characteristics or set of behaviours but about creating relational environments where all can flourish. Leadership does not reside in a single entity but emerges as an outcome of processes and conditions between people and their organizations. Ospina and Foldy (2010) propose that the relational dimensions of leadership are critical to collective action across boundaries and leadership; in this context leadership is an outcome of human social constructions “emerging from the rich connections and interdependencies of organizations and their members” (2010:293). The phenomenon of leadership, from a constructionist standpoint, is a social process of meaning making that emerges as a group creates strategy, challenges everyday normative assumptions and adapts as a course of action becomes clear. Leadership is a property of the group, found not in specific entities but embedded in the group’s culture, context, history and conversation (Drath 2001; Dachler and Hosking 1995; Ospina and Sorenson 2006).
Leaders and Leadership: A Brief History

Early approaches to understanding leadership focused on the traits and characteristics of individual leaders. The underpinning of this approach was the notion that certain individuals possessed unique capacities rarely found in others. Hundreds of studies were conducted in the 1930s and 1940s that attempted to find traits that would ensure leadership success. These studies often referred to leaders as “great men” emphasizing the cultural notion that leadership was primarily a masculine trait. Stogdill (1948), an early trait theorist, recognized the importance of identifying traits but understood that the interaction of the traits with the situational context of the leader was key to understanding leadership. House and Aditya suggest that “one problem with early trait research was that there was little empirically substantiated personality theory to guide the search for leadership traits. Consequently, there were few replicative investigations of the same traits” (1997:410). Yukl (1998) adds that the early work in identifying traits failed to pay attention to intervening variables in the causal chain, thus creating difficulty in connecting leadership traits to behaviours and relatedly leadership effectiveness.

After the Second World War, researchers became disenchanted with chasing the elusive traits and factors of earlier idealized notions of leadership and became interested instead in the behavioural expression of traits. The guiding assumption of early behavioural research was that there were universally effective leadership behaviours, which could be studied by laboratory observation and collecting anecdotal data. Yukl (1998) further suggests that universal theories of leadership fall into two categories, either descriptive universality or prescriptive universality. The
first category highlights functions performed by leaders, while the second category identifies specific functions that all leaders must execute to be effective. This considerably more contextualized research led to important insights into how leader’s resolve role conflict, address the demands of employees and overcome the constraints and limitations found within the workplace (Yukl 1998). According to House and Aditya (1997) there were two main contributions from the behavioural research of this period—task orientation and person orientation—suggesting that the functions of managing and leading were not just about achievement but also about influencing others. These early searches for the “one best way” to lead paved the way for later theories in the 1980s that avowed that successful leadership focuses on task and social influence processes (McClelland 1975; Blake and Mouton 1984). According to Yukl (1998), prior to the 1980s most definitions of leadership and their accompanying theories emphasized rationality and reason as a means to influence constituents. Later theories, both trait based and behaviour based, strongly highlight the emotional aspects of leadership influence.

Behavioural theories did much to highlight the individual styles of leaders but took little account of the situations or contingencies of leadership. According to Bolden et al., “situational theories were developed to indicate that the style to be used is dependent upon situational factors such as the nature of followers, task, organization and other environmental variables” (2011:28). The primary research method for situational leadership was a comparative study of two or more leadership situations. Yukl (1998) relates that the dependant variables were often leadership attitudes, activities, behavioural patterns and influence processes. Fiedler (1964)
identifies the distinction between a leader’s task-oriented behaviours and their relationship-oriented behaviours. In his theory, he highlights that success in these behaviours was contingent on the follower and the circumstance in which they were enacted.

Hersey and Blanchard (1969) extended Fielder’s model and achieved great recognition by practitioners for their situational leadership model that embodied a life cycle theory of leadership. Within this model, leader effectiveness was predicated upon the degree of task orientation and relationship orientation demonstrated by the leader in a given situation in conjunction with the maturity level of the follower. The model suggested that, as the maturity level of the follower increases, the need for task orientation and relationship orientation on the part of the leader will decrease. Hersey and Blanchard’s project has been largely discredited for a lack of empirical robustness, conceptual ambiguity and a lack of clarity in how terms such as leader, effectiveness and maturity are defined (Vecchio 1987; Yukl 1998). Despite this, situational and contingency theories contributed to the growing awareness that leaders could be developed and offered practical guidance to leaders in the field. However, Bolden et al. suggest that this theory remains problematic:

The dominant tools are somewhat simplistic (although this is also a part of their appeal) and fail to engage meaningfully with some of the practical challenges of leadership, such as how to master multiple leadership styles while remaining consistent; how to respond to multiple, complex and poorly defined tasks; how to determine the needs of followers and balance leadership styles for individuals and groups; how to allow for leadership by more than one person and across multiple and changing groups; and, what to do if the dominant style of the leader is ill-suited to the needs of the followers and situation when a change in leadership is not an option. [2011:28]
The rallying cry of leaders and leadership in the new millennium was the call to create corporate cultures that were highly responsive to constituents’ needs. This call rekindled interest in charismatic and transformational leadership styles. Burns (1978) describes transformational leaders as those who could unite followers around a common purpose. Bass (1990) compares transactional leaders with transformational leaders, concluding that highly effective leaders expressed a charismatic inspirational style. Transformational leadership embodied charisma, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration (Avolio et al. 1988; Bass 1990). Iles and Preece suggest that “such leaders stimulate organizational members intellectually and give them individualized consideration. In empirical studies, transformational leadership was more highly correlated with the exertion of extra effort, satisfaction with the leader and perceptions of leader effectiveness” (2006:319). They damningly conclude that most studies of leadership are theoretical rather than empirical and that practising leaders are rarely observed.

Transformational leadership (Burns 1978; Bass 1990), charismatic leadership (Shamir et al. 1993), servant leadership (Greenleaf 1977) and other ethical leadership theories are clustered under the root construct of positive leadership or authentic leadership theory. Luthans and Avolio (2003) determine that a convergence of positive psychology, transformational leadership and ethical leadership was necessary for organizations to thrive and to withstand competitive pressures. This synthesis of leadership theories is known as authentic leadership. While numerous definitions abound for authentic leadership, partial agreement coalesces around the word authentic. Rather than define the whole term, Shamir
and Eilam (2005) simply define the word authentic in its original sense of candid, open and transparent or, not a fake. They suggest that to be truly useful, the term authentic must highlight perspectives on leadership that have been neglected by other leadership theories, models or frameworks. Further, they emphasize that authentic leaders cannot “fake” their leadership and that leadership, itself, is an essential act of self-expression.

Authenticity means uniqueness. While the mission, vision and values of an authentic leader may look similar to others, the way in which they arrive at their values is completely original, forged through personal experience and therefore inimitable. Novicevic et al. (2006) suggest that philosophical meanings for authenticity are rooted in personal values, principles and moral or ethical choices, while psychological meanings have been grounded in individual traits, states and identity. Most authors agree that authentic leaders align their actions and behaviours with their core, internalized values and beliefs as opposed to responding to external pressures and impression management (Phipps 2010; Eigel and Kuhnert 2005; Bass and Steidlmeier 1999). According to Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003), the focus of positive leadership theories (charisma, values-based leadership, transformational leadership and authentic leadership) is on the leaders and how they affect and elicit the emotions and commitment of subordinates. As admirable as these later more positive, ethical and principle-driven theories are, they still rely on a singular and discrete notion of leaders and leadership as existing within a unitary entity.
Leadership, in this sense, is decontextualized and broken down into essential parts that become sets of individualized leadership competencies. Throughout the history of leadership research and theory development, most scholars have found themselves as either essentialist or nonessentialist in their perspective on leadership; indeed, much of the current research is intent on defending the correctness of these opposing positions. The tension for practitioners is to determine whether to develop a core set of leadership behaviours and competencies or to focus on understanding the situation and context in which they find themselves. Problematically, reviews of leadership research reveal hundreds of traits, behaviours and situational variables that lack a solid base of evidence to suggest universality (Bolman and Deal 1991). According to Mats Alvesson, many organizational theorists have called “for a radical reorientation of the elaboration and measurement of abstracted constructs to the analysis of leadership as a practical accomplishment and social process defined through interaction” (1996:456).

The stripping away of traits and behaviours from context may make universal or essential qualities and characteristics difficult to define and enact. Language, itself, is ambiguous and context-laden, rendering such definitions relatively meaningless.

The exactly same definition may then be informed by different metaphors and thus different meanings. In organizational culture thinking people may, for example, embrace a similar definition of culture as a set of meanings, ideas, values and symbolism shared by a group. But this may well be accompanied by a high diversity of thinking due to the metaphor for culture perhaps being one of a compass functionally guiding direction, a sacred cow protecting certain basic assumptions and ideals from being questioned or changed or a frozen reality where the (dominant) meanings, ideas and values fix the current social reality and subordinate the organizational members to it. [Alvesson 1996:458-459]
Alvesson (1996) concludes that, given the variety of phenomena under scrutiny and the ambiguity of language use, a common definition of leadership is highly unlikely.

Essentialist philosophy has transformed slightly over time but remains true to its platonic and Aristotelian roots that suggest there are two realities—the essential universe and the perceived universe (Takala 1998). The essential universe is the ideal and the perceived universe the perception. From this perspective the goal of scientific research is to identify “real knowledge” in order to move beyond opinion and belief (Kezar 2004). Within leadership, essentialism is used to identify universal traits and behaviours that direct what can be considered the observable “facts” about the phenomena. Essentialism as a philosophy of leadership emanates from modernist Western philosophy and research.

According to Adrianna Kezar, essentialist theories are seen as desirable because

they provide specific advice to change agents by identifying essential characteristics of leadership that can be used regardless of the context or that identify enduring context issues or situational types to match leader personality and preferences. The idealized types (like servant leadership) or models developed such as adaptive leadership provide ready tools and approaches for leaders. The results are tangible and usable. At some level, they also provide hope. Beyond the problematic world of appearances lie enduring truths about leadership that if we try hard enough, we can understand and implement. [2004:116]

Leadership models such the ones mentioned above reinforce the notion that leadership resides in an entity and there is one best way to be a leader or to fulfill a leadership role. This perspective is consistent with the notion that there is an objective “truth” to be found and a Cartesian separation of mind and nature
(Bradbury and Lichtenstein 2000; Uhl-Bien 2006). Additionally, it suggests that individuals have a knowing mind and this knowledge is the property of the individual. Such an individual is the designer and director of an internal and external order. This view of leaders and leadership focuses on the individual and their characteristics, perceptions, intentions and behaviours. According to Dachler and Hosking, “social relations are enacted by subjects to achieve knowledge about and influence over, other people and groups” (1995:3). The individual perspective on leadership is anchored in monologism; that is, the leader as a single authority advocating a particular perspective and aiming to get consensus on a pre-established outcome (Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011). Hosking and Morley (1991) refer to this perspective as entititative, reflecting constructions of the self that focus too significantly on the individual, drawing hard, self-world boundaries and relating to others in ways that, first and foremost, produce value for self. Sampson (1993) later connected this entititative approach with a Western individualism suggesting that the self is stable and bounded, possessing individual knowledge that relates to other in terms of what other can do for self. Sampson submits that this construction of the individual is concerned with the notion of a monological, unitary and discrete self who uses others in lucid pursuit of personal interest and goal attainment.

Anti-essentialist and social or relational constructionist philosophies underpin many of the new theories of leadership. Each of these, at their core, examines how we apprehend the world and ourselves (Hosking and Morley 1991; Uhl-Bien 2006; Gergen 2009; Cunliffe 2009; Lawler 2005; Ashman 2007). Relational social constructionism assumes that social reality is embedded within relationships and
“takes as primary the nexus of relations, rather than focusing on discrete, abstracted phenomena” (Bradbury and Lichtenstein 2000:551). Social realities are created and maintained in conversation, rather than in structures, and are culturally, historically and linguistically influenced (Boje 1991; Cunliffe 2002; Deetz 1996; Shotter and Cunliffe 2002). Social constructionism, therefore, highlights the inconsistent and often incongruent aspects of the world and the challenging nature of how we explain what we experience.

Within social constructionism, language, as a representation of reality, is replaced by an understanding that language is constitutive. Our social realities and identities are created in dialogical and relational processes (Watson 1995; Shotter 1997; Shotter and Cunliffe 2002). Sonia Ospina and Erica Foldy suggest that “relationality refers to the theoretical understanding that self and other are inseparable and co-evolve in ways that must be accounted for” (2010:293). All understanding of thoughts and assumptions are processed in the context of continual conversation and in relationships rather than individually and cognitively.

Our understanding of our surrounding continually emerges in relationally responsive interaction, in which everything we do is a complex mixture of our own and others’ actions and talk: we are inherently responsive to each other – to our own and others’ words, gestures and feelings. These are so interwoven that in the moment by moment back and forth of our dialogue, no one person is in control. [Cunliffe 2008:130]

Relational leadership embodies an intersubjective worldview and recognizes the complexity inherent in being and working in relationship with others. Dialogue is central to a relational way of being and the act of dialogue opens a space for different perspectives and worldviews. Dialogism implies talking with people not to them, underscoring that meaning arises as we engage in open conversation with

To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree … In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life. [293]

In dialogism, human agents are seen as unfinished chains of response fused with others in an ongoing and unfinalizable dialogical relationship. Each conversation holds elements of our history, culture and language while embodying new meanings that spring to life in the moment of creation with others. Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) suggest that dialogism embodies relationality, an embracing of difference, an openness to new ideas and the shaping of meaning and new possibilities for action.

There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even past meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all)—they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue. [Bakhtin 1986:170]

Dialogic conversation is not engaged in with the objective of consensus or of convincing others of one’s viewpoint. By its nature dialogue is both polyphonic (multi-voiced) and heteroglossic (imbued with intersecting worldviews, perspectives and judgments); therefore, interactions may be characterized by tension, ambiguity and resistance. Bakhtin understood this tension as resulting from the conversational forces that unify and disseminate meaning (centrifugal and centripetal). Western worldviews often hold consensus or agreement as the preferred outcome of organizational conversation. Such a focus often leads to the realization of
predetermined organizational objectives, while marginalizing and silencing diverse
and plural perspectives. Within the concept of dialogism there is an underlying
premise that meaning is not total or fixed but is fluid and dynamic, catalyzing and
making necessary the need for ongoing dialogue.

An antidote to the abstraction of essentialism is the pragmatic focus on
individuals in the concrete existence of life oriented toward what Heidegger (1962)
refers to as being-in-the-world (*in-der-Welt-sein*). Existential phenomenology
focuses on our place in the world and how we make meaning of it. It is concerned
with the human experience as lived. Consciousness is not separate from the world
but is a formation of our situated experience (Laverty 2003). Martin Heidegger refers
to this as the “hermeneutics of facticity” or our understanding of the factual concrete
elements of our life as we see them. We are continually thrown into a world, into an
existence without our consent and, hence, we are irrevocably merged with that world
before our consciousness of it. We are always already there. Any preconceptions of
the world or of self are considered by Heidegger to be abstractions.

At the core of existential, hermeneutic phenomenology is an examination of
how we apprehend the world and ourselves and make meaning of what it is to be in
the world. Polt offers a succinct definition of being-in-the-world:

This term indicates that we are essentially involved in a context – we have a
place in a meaningful whole where we deal with other things and people. The
particular content of this context will vary from person to person, and from
culture to culture. But it can be said … that our relation to the world is not
disinterested – it is active engagement. We are not and never can be radically
detached from the world. (1999:76)
Being-in-the-world is a crucial concept to leadership development in that it suggests that leaders are always already situated and anchored in the everyday milieu. Leadership, in this view, is intersubjective and engaged, not disengaged in developing decontextualized universal skills. According to Ian Ashman and John Lawler, “the prime implication for leadership practice is not how leaders might engage followers but how all…can themselves become engaged” (2008:259).

**Leader Development and Leadership Development**

As with the distinction between management and leadership and leaders and leadership, a similar distinction must be made between management development and leadership development. Management development principally focuses on managerial education and training emphasizing acquisition of knowledge and skill related to the performance of managerial tasks. The focus is on developing a repertoire of skills that are tried and true and proven over time to solve commonly occurring problems. Although these processes refer to management development, the orientation is toward training as opposed to development (Day 2001; Baldwin and Padgett 1994).

By contrast, leadership development expands an organization’s collective capacity to engage in leadership processes (Day 2001; McCauley et al. 1998). According to David Day, “leadership processes are those that generally enable groups of people to work together in meaningful ways” (2001:582). As organizations pursue nontraditional, flatter structures that require influence and strategy rather than authority to move organizational objectives forward, normative approaches that advocate the systematic application of theories and practices may leave leaders...
(formal and informal) ill-equipped to grapple with the complexity of emergent challenges (Cunliffe 2002, 2004; Vaill 1996; Heifetz 1994). Development in this context refers to the development of leadership processes as well as the development of the leader (Iles and Preece, 2006). These are two different but significant components for encouraging the growth and development of leadership capacity within an organization. According to Iles and Preece (2006), the focus of leader development should be on building greater human capacity, while leadership development should focus on effective and meaningful communication processes.

Many authors suggest that attempts to develop leadership within organizations have been seriously diffused by the confusion between the development of leaders and the development of leadership (Day 2001; Wood 2005; Iles and Preece 2006; Crevani et al. 2010). The field of leadership studies has traditionally been leader-centric, conceptualizing leadership as an individual-level skill, with a preoccupation on developing unitary leaders, their characteristics, attitudes and actions (Wood 2005). This focus on abstracted characteristics has led in some decontextualized ways to the development of the individual but has done little to foster generative and innovative conversation about the complex challenges faced by organizations today.

According to Iles and Preece, “what are commonly called leadership development programmes are often, in fact, leader development programmes” (2006:322). The focus of such programs is on the intrapersonal development of the leader through competency frameworks. These frameworks are built into many commonly used leadership development tools such as 360-degree feedback assessments, personality preference inventories (both psychometric and sociometric
instrumentation), personal learning or personal development plans, coaching, mentoring, action learning projects and leadership development journals. Each of these popular means of developing “leadership,” intentionally or otherwise, reinforces the notion that leadership is about the essences, attributions and competencies of the individual (Day 2001; Iles and Preece 2006). This focus on the development of the individual leader has led to a preoccupation with identifying the aptitudes of leadership as a set of discrete competencies.

Modern organizations, with their reliance on objectivity, rationality and fairness, attempt to reduce leadership behaviours to rational criteria, linear models and aptitudes. Within this objectivist ontology, a predisposition to measurement has emerged. This is largely implemented through the abstraction of leadership traits, behaviours and characteristics from their naturally occurring contexts. The popular appeal of competency theories, models, methods and assessments is not difficult to understand given the predisposition of organizations to privilege quantification, rationality, control and clarity (Grey 1999; Townley 2002; Carroll et al. 2008).

Competency frameworks, as a means of measuring leadership traits and behaviours, fragment and reduce good theory based in sound thinking and solid philosophy into pieces that stand alone as competencies. This fragmentation and reduction of ideas translated into leadership competencies delivers behaviour that is all too frequently routinized, simplistic and out of sync with the overall persona of the leader and the complexity of the work. Such frameworks are used as mechanisms to reward or discipline within the context of performance management and rely on the
direct supervisor to both understand the competency as written and to recognize it made visible in the behaviour of the leader.

According to Carroll et al., competency thinking “seeks to define and enshrine an ideal in terms of management and leadership by which others can be measured, evaluated, legitimated and disciplined. Consequently, they become constitutive of identity and a mechanism of domination” (2008:365). Additionally, these competency frameworks compel individual behaviours irrespective of contextual relevancy and meaningfulness to the work at hand. Many competency frameworks have a disproportionate emphasis on the doing of management rather than the being of leadership. This focus on productivity, speed and efficiency is frequently detrimental to finding new and insightful ways of solving complex issues. Such a focus is, by definition, the enemy of the distinctive, the original and the innovative.

Competency assessments currently form the basis for most leadership development and review processes. Most of the mainstream tools for the identification and development of potential leaders within organizations are competency based. Such tools rely on predetermined capabilities to measure a leader’s effectiveness in the hope that leadership will materialize. Static leadership competencies cannot resolve complex system issues while severed from their organizational context, thus leadership cannot be disassociated from the temporal and situational context. In the presence of an incompatible organizational system or culture, a leader may remain powerless to achieve what is expected of them…leadership occurs in situ and cannot be distilled in a number of constituent elements. It is in a constant state of flux and hence can never be captured within a static framework. [Bolden et al. 2011:82]
The focus on the development of leadership competencies within the individual leader as a means of inspiring leadership is problematic. Competencies, as a framework for developing high performance, produces what Chia and Holt describe as “methodological individualism” (2006:638). A form of leading that gives primacy to the individual, lends itself to instrumental relationships and co-opts others into an overarching strategic plan. Carroll et al. (2008) argue that competencies by their very nature are objective, measureable, technical and tangible—all characteristics necessary for the work of managing but incompatible to leadership. “Consequently, the acceptance of competencies as a basis for leadership seems particularly problematic, inappropriate and misplaced” (364).

Leadership occurs in everyday experience, in practical and embedded ways. In order to understand leadership, it is vital to understand the social processes that occur as leaders and others construct their realities in relation to each other. Dian Hosking advocates for switching our attention from leaders as individuals to leadership as processes.

It is essential to focus on leadership processes: processes in which influential ‘acts of organizing’ contribute to the structuring of interactions and relationships, activities and sentiments; processes in which definitions of social order are negotiated, found acceptable, implemented and renegotiated; processes in which interdependencies are organized in ways which, to a greater or lesser degree, promote the values and interests of the social order. [1988:147]

This more relational perspective on leadership requires a profound understanding of all social experience as intersubjective and leadership “as a way-of-being-in-relationship-to-others” (Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011:1430). Within this view organizations are not understood as systems and structures, but rather as webs of
significance (Geertz 1973) and interdependency, where the primary means of relating is conversational.

Passage …

In this chapter, I have described the theoretical underpinnings of the concept of the narrative self and the historical conceptions of the self that are embodied in narrative identity. I have also covered a broad expanse of literature that details the history and theory of leaders and leadership development as it has evolved through changing contexts. I have done so in an attempt to illustrate the shift away from seeing leaders as monological and heroic, toward a more spacious conception of the leader as engaged in dialogical relationship with others.

Comprehending the self as dialogical is crucial to envisaging a new kind of leadership that is broader in its cultural and historical horizons. If it is true that the owl of Minerva only flies at dusk, leaders currently are leading their organizations in post-postmodern times. While this speaks to our experience of increasing fragmentation, ambiguity and uncertainty in all environments, it does not explain the ubiquity of Cartesian duality or the notion of the ghost in the machine—the disembodied spirit present only to its own self, to its own thoughts and urgently real feelings. The modernist employee often seeks out opportunities to lead and is, in fact, frequently considered the embodiment of a certain and rational style of leadership. Modern notions of leadership have been about discrete individuals, unitary and authoritative leaders who can change a situation by applying leadership techniques; single authorities unresponsive to how their voices are heard and
received, sponsoring specific views and ideologies. These are leaders and managers of image, impression and meaning, looking for consensus on a pre-established vision. Such leaders construct and reconstruct modern organizations that reward monological practices and the implementation of simple solutions to complex issues. For centuries this worked well but, if we heed the wisdom of Hegel, the owl has flown on this era.

The shadow side of leading from this modern perspective is an increasing loneliness and isolation, a disconnect between the leader and the natural environment, an increasing gulf between self and others in families and work spaces and an erosion of the ties between leaders and communities. Increasingly, leaders are expected to transform not only their organizations but also the places and spaces of stakeholders, conceiving and implementing socially-aware practices. Weaving together the concepts of self-narrative, dialogue and leadership creates a more thoughtful understanding of the interconnections between self and society (Mead 1934). It allows for a notion of society as populated, renewed and ultimately transformed by leaders as developing beings-in-the-world.

As with the theory of the dialogical self, the fundamental axiom for dialogical leaders is relationality. In the context of leadership, relationship is expressed in the form of a tangible relationship between human beings. The focus is not on selves as entities, but rather selves as relationships. Differences in an interconnected world require dialogical relationships between people not only to create communities that are liveable but also leaders who have the capacity to deal with difference, contrast, tension and uncertainty (Cooper and Hermans 2006). The multiplicity of “I” positions
held by the leader allows for a fluid movement back and forth between viewpoints. Such movement may enable the leader to hold contrasting thoughts, ambiguities and perspectives. As leaders become comfortable in dialogue within self, they gain greater comfort in dealing with challenges that are complex and relational.

I undertake this inquiry hoping to enrich the repertoire of understandings that are available to appreciate how relational, socially-aware leaders create institutional lives with others that hold the potential for dialogical moments—moments where reflection, learning and critical practices can occur.
Chapter Two: Inquiry Approach

A Narrative, Interpretive Perspective

In this chapter, I am positioning narrative as a methodological approach that explores the stories and personal experiences of leaders as they make sense of what it means to lead relationally. While narrative theory was explored in the Introduction as a lens or perspective and in Chapter One as part of the literature review, this chapter examines narrative as a research approach that privileges intersubjectivity and the particularity of experience. I introduce narrative inquiry as an approach to leadership research that offers valuable insights and conveys the contours of experience and meaning, shaped in relation to memory, to ever-changing present contexts and to imagined futures. This ethnographic research differs from other kinds of exploration in that it emphasizes a different kind of knowledge than what we might garner from surveys and statistics. Each account uniquely highlights local knowledge that is not found in universal explications of an orderly social world. The stories highlight the situated, historical and cultural life-world of the research participant and allow the researcher to focus on specific phenomena such as leadership and social awareness as people experience them in their own contexts.

Stories are captivating. When we hear a story our interest is piqued. We can relate (or not) to the storyteller, to the content of the story and to the maxims, values and principles inherent in the account. At a minimum, we will evaluate the tale
against our own lived experience and judge it accordingly. From time to time we may identify so powerfully with a story that it becomes part of who we are and how we see the world. Laurel Richardson argues that “when people are asked why they do what they do, they provide narrative explanations. Not logico-scientific categorical ones. It is the way individuals understand their own lives and the lives of others” (1990:126).

While narrative, interpretive research is about studying the stories of research participants in relation to a given phenomenon, in this case, leaders who seek socially-just outcomes, it is less about structural and discourse analysis than it is about the meaning with which the research participants imbue an event. The narrative, interpretive perspective is a powerful method to employ in the study of leadership and social awareness because it reveals the principles, values, intentions and agency of the research participants while emphasizing the complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty of their continuously unfolding lives. The process of storytelling helps both the researcher and the participants to come to other, more complex understandings of experience through active listening to the stories of others and the remembering and recounting of their own. This perspective is underlined by Bruner (1986, 1990) who explains that personal narratives provide a valuable source of insight into the way that we make sense of, clarify and order our lives. Stories are the way that we linguistically articulate the connectedness of the human experience and convey meaning about important concepts such as beliefs, values, principles and strong evaluations (Taylor 1989).
An ever-present challenge in scholarship is to choose a theoretical lens (narrative, interpretive, existential, dialogical) that complements the method of inquiry (storytelling, unstructured interviews, participant observation) while simultaneously encouraging insight into specific phenomena (relational leadership and social awareness). As with Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011), my ontology was relational and intersubjective rather than individual and cognitive. Scholars such as Ricoeur and Taylor helped me to better understand what I believed to be true about the self, particularly the self as mutually constituted with and by the other. As a result, the approach of this inquiry was designed to explore how leaders practise, their way-of-being and their capacity to engage in dialogue and a valuing and dignifying of others. Given that, it was important that my own ontology, epistemology and methodology expressed a kind of symmetry and congruence.

While narrative analysis is still not a central methodological approach to leadership studies, the insights that have emerged from narrative accounts have been influential. Examples include Ann Cunliffe and Matthew Eriksen’s (2011) narrative study of Federal Security Directors as they make sense of their environment post 9/11 and grapple with what it means to lead through relationships and conversation rather than systems and procedures. Another narrative analysis that has contributed to the literature on leadership and social change is Sonia Ospina and Erica Foldy’s (2010) multi-year qualitative study of leaders for social change. This inquiry richly contextualizes the leadership practices of focusing on relationships, shifting perspectives on social justice, spanning boundaries between and across stakeholder groups and seeing the other as oneself. Most importantly,
the work shifts the focus from the individual leader to leader practices illustrating
day-to-day experiences rather than universal qualities and characteristics. A
somewhat damning observation of leadership studies is that there is more research
written on the importance of narrative to a contextualized understanding of
leadership practice than there are actual narrative studies of practising leaders and
leadership (Jackson and Parry 2008).

Narrative approaches to research vary quite widely. The diversity of studies
that fall under the narrative rubric confuses any attempts to state an uncontested
definition. In light of this, Susan E. Chase broadly suggests that “contemporary
narrative can be characterized as an amalgam of interdisciplinary analytic lenses,
diverse disciplinary approaches and both traditional and innovative methods – all
revolving around an interest in biographical particulars as narrated by the one who
lives them” (2005:651). Additionally, F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin
(1999) theorize that narrative research exposits theoretical ideas about the nature of
life as lived brought to bear on experience as lived.

Differing methodologies are often framed in relationship to the research
questions, the research context and the horizon of understanding held by the
researcher. As noted by D. Jean Clandinin et al. (2007), the researcher’s own
narrative of experience provides an important starting point for narrative inquiry.
They suggest that an exploration of narrative beginnings enables researchers to
place themselves within the research and “speak to the researcher’s relationship to,
and interest in, the inquiry” (25). In the Introduction, I began to articulate some of the
reflexive narrative beginnings that led me to this inquiry. In successive chapters, I
continue to reflect on and integrate the learning that came from my experience in living this inquiry. The ways in which I do this are varied. My reflections are equal parts of thinking about my own horizon of understanding in relationship to the stories I have heard and how they line up with my own experience of being-in-the-world. The process of inquiry also involves moving reflexively back and forth between meaning systems, both my own and others’, until a fusion of horizons occurs (Gadamer 1984). In this chapter, I offer an account of the narrative, interpretive research approaches that I followed. The approaches are interwoven and nonsequential in keeping with how the research unfolded. To start, I will review the research questions that directed this inquiry.

**Research Questions and Underlying Assumptions**

I was interested in how some leaders held a high degree of social awareness, placing human concerns as primary in their decision making. I was particularly interested in the part that their self-narratives played in forming their passion and deep caring about “other.” And, I wondered about what practices (rather than models and steps) contributed to self–other understanding and to critical reflection in questioning taken-for-granted ways of being.

In the Introduction and preceding chapter, I identified the literature that influenced my thinking and was pivotal to building my frame of reference or scaffold for this inquiry. Similarly, there were qualitative principles that I drew on in designing and conducting the research. The qualitative perspective is human-centred with an emphasis on interpretive understanding and narrative methods. Underpinning the
inquiry are the qualitative principles that truth is fluid and is situated within multiple realities, that research into human behaviour is best served in environments that are natural and uncontrolled, that theory is co-constructed with participants and, lastly, that meaning making is central.

Hermeneutic, ethnographic and interpretive research is emergent research. It is a method in process and is continually unfolding (Kirby and McKenna 1989). With a view to summarizing and sharing the primary assumptions that informed my research journey, I offer the following observations.

Knowledge is intuitive, often tacit and occurs in context. The researcher and the participants come to know and understand the world through their conversations about their lived experience. They are always already enmeshed in the world and engaged in the process of reflexively moving back and forth between meaning systems until new understandings occur.

Open-ended questions from both researcher and participants catalyze learning and are at the heart of listening, thinking, imagining and relating to each other throughout the research process. Narrative and metaphor are intimately linked and bring a kind of coherence to the stories that participants tell. They constitute productive fantasy and semantic innovation and are a method of weaving a life story that has coherence and meaning.

The research text provides a space for exploring meaning. Both readers and writers co-produce the meaning of the text. The text, itself, works to provide a means of engaging others’ perspectives and interpretations. These reflections contribute to the complexity and multiplicity of understandings.
Getting Started

I came into the process of doing a Ph.D. with the idea of conducting my research jointly with my colleague, Penny Lane. For many years Penny and I have been interested in leadership and how justice is socially and relationally constructed. We have known one another for over a decade and, in the last three years, have jointly undertaken consulting for the Acacia Group. Acacia is the creation of three friends and colleagues who are passionate about leadership and social responsibility. In fact, our tag line is “Socially Responsible Leadership.” As a result, it seemed self-evident that Penny and I would want to jointly conduct our research.

While we have completed our Ph.D. requirements individually, our research interests align as a result of our friendship, working relationship and passion for developing leaders to enact socially- and relationally-aware leadership. During the last three years, we have successfully evolved certain processes in our work that we believed would add richness and depth to the research process. Doing research with someone else is not uncommon in the academy. Doing research as a Ph.D. student with another Ph.D. student is less common and required a deep understanding of ourselves in relationship to each other.

The Ph.D. process is a long one and is most often undertaken by competent people who have a sense of the way they want to design and articulate their research. As can be imagined, the road was not without bumps and, from time to time, we were literally the “other” to one another as the research process unfolded. It was during these times that the scaffold of trust and respect, forged over many years, held us. What was illuminating for us, as researchers, was the way in which
we had to experience being the “other” while simultaneously staying open to
dialogical moments, even as we asked our participants to experience the same.

Throughout the development of the Acacia Group and our shared consulting,
Penny and I have had connections with leaders who are relationally engaged with
others and who hold open a space for imaginative and egalitarian dialogue to occur.
We extended an invitation to many of these leaders, inviting them to join us for five
months in the process of understanding how meanings of social justice are co-
constructed and how identity is forged in dynamic relationship with others. The
commitment we asked for was not insignificant. It required a willingness to engage
with the researchers and the other research participants in open and transparent
ways, taking time to tell stories, journal and share reflections. It was truly an
invitation to a “thinking space”—a site, space and discourse for dialogue about and
development in relationally-oriented, socially-aware leadership practices. Ultimately,
after many emails, many prospects and many third-party connections, seven people
accepted the invitation. We were asking for a lot and they responded willingly with
open minds and hearts.

**Telling Stories**

Narrative inquiries often mirror the process of storytelling, which is rarely
straightforward and frequently both tangential and circular. It was the nonlinear
aspect of the research that, on occasion, left me feeling vertiginous and whirling
within the stories. As discussed in other parts of this dissertation, stories rarely stay
topically centred and, more often than not, are told circuitously, episodically and out
of sequence (Bruner 1986; Polkinghorne 1988). As I write about this exploration, the
design of the inquiry becomes sharper and more solid than it seemed in the midst of the doing. I now see that the pathway forward became clear only as I moved forward, self-consciously and with trepidation. Often participants’ stories would swirl through my head and I would attempt to make sense of the participants’ experiences and their reflections on both their stories and the research process in tandem with my own stories, reflections and interpretations. As we shared our stories, we confirmed, affirmed and disconfirmed various perspectives. Slowly, storylines and themes began to emerge as we collaboratively wove meaning in the moment of responding to one another. Clarity has emerged through the writing of this text but new meaning continues to emerge and will do so over time; meaning is ultimately unfinalizable (Bakhtin 1981; Salgado and Clegg 2011), forged in relationship and always in process.

**Invitation to Research**

Receiving permission to conduct behavioural research through the Behavioural Research Ethics Board ensures that justice and ethics permeate the invitation process. This is the right and proper structuring of any research experience. As with many ethical practices, however, adhering to the letter of ethics can be different from adhering to the spirit of ethics. According to Peter Block (2009), invitation is not simply a method of bringing people together for some purpose; it is a way of living and being in community with others. Invitation, disseminated in this way, is a request not just to show up but also to engage with others in a dialogical openness. Therefore, it was critical to both Penny and me that people receive this invitation as an opportunity to explore the possibility of leadership as processes and practices
that foster socially-aware action. The emphasis was on accountability, possibility and co-creation rather than answers, solutions and steps. Participants were not the “subjects” of the research and there was no right or wrong way to articulate their lived experience. There was no subtext of which they were unaware.

The ethical process ensures potential research participants know there is no penalty for not accepting the invitation but it was imperative to more broadly ensure people knew that there would be no harm to our relationship through declining to participate. During the planning phase of this research, it was key to reflect on the many ways that people experience invitation and to think through what Peter Block refers to as the six conditions for invitation.

Invitation is the means through which hospitality is created. Invitation counters the conventional belief that change requires mandate or persuasion. Invitation honours the importance of choice, the necessary condition for accountability …Then we include the six elements of a powerful invitation: naming the possibility about which we are convening, being clear about whom we invite, emphasizing freedom of choice in showing up, specifying what is required of each should they choose to attend, making a clear request and making the invitation as personal as possible. [2009:113]

The research participants were primarily identified through our experiences with them as part of a network of leaders who think and act in socially-aware ways. We sent these leaders an email inviting their participation and attached a letter of introduction to the research. Initially, we hoped to attract fifteen to twenty leaders but as the methodology became sharper we recognized that the amount of time we were asking for would make involvement prohibitive for some. Eight participants responded affirmatively in an email. Of those who declined to participate, many
reasons were cited, the most frequent being the time commitment required to participate.

During the recruitment process, we spoke with colleagues, who because of their occupation and position, were aware of leaders who demonstrated a reflective leadership concerned with the wellbeing of others. We provided these colleagues with a third-party letter of introduction to the research that they could send to potential leaders as an overview of the research questions, process and commitment required. Only one research participant was identified through third-party recruitment.

When we learned of a leader’s potential interest in the study we followed up with a phone call. During the call, we outlined the research aims, explained our philosophy as qualitative researchers and reviewed both the consent form and the agreement to confidentiality. We were intentional about ensuring that participants could withdraw if they were not able to fulfill the research commitment. Each of the eight people assured us that they had carefully considered the request and were interested in and excited about participating. People finalized their commitment by signing and returning to us the documents described above. One participant recognized that she could not commit the time and energy to the research project and dropped out between the first phone call outlining the research process and consent and the first interview. That left us with seven participants overall. The participants agreed to be identified by their first names. A change in font distinguishes their voices from the rest of the text. A description of each participant is presented in Chapter Three.
Research Setting

The setting for this research was the virtual space of the telephone and online journal and discussion forum. It became increasingly clear to Penny and me as we planned the design for our research that it would, of necessity, be multi-sited. George Marcus describes this kind of research as postmodern, examining the circulation of cultural meanings, objects and identities:

This mode defines for itself an object of study that cannot be accounted for ethnographically by remaining focused on a single site of intensive investigation. It develops instead a strategy or design of research that acknowledges macrotheoretical concepts and narratives of the world system but does not rely on them for the contextual architecture framing a set of subjects. [1995:96]

The kind of participants that we recruited could be characterized as global citizens. A global citizen is one who places their identity in a global community and who works toward building that community’s values and practices. Richard Falk posits that there are many dimensions of the extension of citizenship beyond the traditional borders of nation and state. He suggests that the extension of the term citizenship to a global domain tends to be aspirational

drawing upon a long tradition of thought and feeling, about the ultimate unity of human experience, giving rise to a politics of desire that posits for the planet as a whole a set of conditions of peace and justice and sustainability. The global citizen, then, adheres to a normative perspective – what needs to happen to create a better world. [1993:41]

While several of our participants resided in British Columbia (five), only one actually lived in Kelowna; others were located in Alberta (one) and the United States (one). During the course of the research our participants spent time in places such as Mexico, France, Uzbekistan and Uganda. As we recognized that we would need
to let go of the idea of face-to-face sessions, we began to rely on what we knew of building learning communities.

**Building a Learning Community**

Learning communities are spaces that invite learning based on reflection, challenging assumptions and exploring interpretations of experience. This kind of learning is often called transformative (Mezirow 1990, 1991) and triple loop (Hargrove 1997) and involves shifting the perspectives and assumptions that we hold in ways that influence how we see ourselves. Much like the storytelling process, this kind of learning is nonlinear and non-sequential. Such learning is iterative and reflexive, happening as participants make meaning throughout the research process and their lives. This kind of learning requires some nurturing and is aided considerably by the development of a “consciou[...](2009:30).

Our challenge, as researchers, was to create a community that would enrich our research participants, where they would feel emotional safety and connection throughout the research process. In deference to the different learning styles of our participants, we aimed to provide venues for interaction that would optimally engage
participants spanning a range of ages and experience. The primary point of interaction was eight individual coaching interviews. I led three of the interviews and three of the interviews were led by Penny. This ensured the opportunity to focus the conversation in the direction of our individual research questions. The first and eighth interviews were co-led. To that, we added three teleconferences to build a learning community and to encourage greater depth of insight through collaborative exploration of the topics. In addition, we provided opportunities to reflect through an online journal and discussion forum.

The Research Process

The research process involved four phases. While these are articulated sequentially, within the research they were interwoven and overlapping. Each engagement with the research participants individually and collectively embodied some or all of the following phases.

The first phase was the invitation to research. This critical phase was a personal invitation to participate and included the researcher and invitee pondering both the commitment and the possibilities for growth, development and community building. Time was spent considering what it meant to consent to participate and what it meant to decline. Both were wholly acceptable and could be revisited within the research process.

The second phase of the research was engagement. In this phase, trust, openness and safety were established between the researcher(s) and the participants. As with invitation, the engagement phase was intentionally revisited
throughout the research. Every effort was made to ensure that participants had the space and permission to reflect and have meaningful dialogue. It was imperative that the researcher(s) model the level of disclosure that they were seeking to create with the participants and that reflexivity was also modelled and encouraged throughout the study.

Phase three of the research included narrative co-construction and reflexivity between the participants and the researcher(s) and within the group. This phase included storytelling with the participants about their leaderly identities and practices including their perceptions of relational responsibility to others. Self and critical reflexivity were encouraged throughout the interviews, teleconferences, online forum and online journal.

The fourth phase was meaning making, which included thematic interpretation of the data, identifying storylines and related meaning dimensions as well as validating the above with study participants. Validation occurred throughout the interviews with the final interview devoted to reviewing storylines, themes and lessons learned by the participants and the researchers. Participants were encouraged to read and comment on the research text.

Embedded within the four phases were two key methods that have been the underpinning of much of my work professionally over the last decade: reflexivity and facilitation.

**Reflexivity**
Reflexivity was critical to this research project because it highlights assumptions and beliefs about how we think about and describe our world. It involves thinking deeply
about the nature of reality, the nature of leadership and the processes of learning. The practice encouraged both participants and researchers to question truth claims, accepted norms and leadership narratives to expose underlying assumptions, contradictions and possibilities. Mats Alvesson and Kaj Skoldberg (2009) suggest that reflective research has two fundamental characteristics—thoughtful interpretation and reflection. Thoughtful interpretation, in this context, meant being highly aware during interactions with participants of the importance of language and their preunderstandings of leading and social awareness. During the research, we developed a series of thought-provoking questions as a means of highlighting basic, taken-for-granted assumptions about the world on the part of the participants and the researchers. We began each interview with a question, article or quote that was sent in advance to the participant for their thought and reflection prior to the interview. As an example, in preparation for our second call we asked the following:

Our experiences with other leaders have influenced our way of being as leaders. Tell me a story about a leader with whom you have been directly involved, whose leadership has held foremost social justice concerns and has been inspirational for you. What were/are the practices that were most meaningful to you? What was the impact on you? What was the impact on others?

Similarly, tell me a story about a leader with whom you have been directly involved who has not demonstrated care for others. What were the practices that were challenging for you? How have you allowed that to influence your leadership practice? What was the impact of this kind of leadership on you and on others? [Interview Two]

This series of questions required multiple levels of reflexivity from the participants. It involved the retelling of two experiences of leadership, with critical analysis of the practices that demonstrated an awareness and concern for others.
Each participant offered empirical material, constructed from multiple perspectives and examining different aspects within the stories. Further questions within the interviews prompted reflection on why certain narratives were dominant, revealing greater critical analysis and the offering of counter-narratives and identities. A deeper examination of these questions and the ensuing conversation is offered in Chapter Four.

**Facilitation**

A critical part of planning the research process was adherence to sound principles of group facilitation. Facilitation is both a way of being in community with others and a means to creating an intimate space for dialogue and meaningful conversation to occur. Dialogue-based facilitation is a multifaceted approach that is grounded in a deep belief in and appreciation of the intelligence and wisdom that each participant brings to the conversation. These principles adhered to within the research were: focusing on relationships, making the process transparent, making the purpose of each session explicit, asking permission, inviting people to engage in telling stories and checking in with participants regularly to ensure emotional safety. The following is an excerpt from the beginning of the first teleconference that offers an example of some of these principles:
Some of the things that we might want to think about a bit as we come together would be, first of all, not everyone is on video today and it would be helpful to identify ourselves before we speak. I’m sure that is a protocol that you are all familiar with but it really is helpful, particularly in the beginning when we are trying to get to know one another. We also have a couple of people who are leaving early today and one of the things that we like to do is to acknowledge people as they leave. Typically in meetings people are just gone and it would be really great if people would give us a heads-up 5 minutes before they are leaving to let us know that they are going, so we can acknowledge that they have been part of the group today and what they have left us with.

The only thing that you might find a little bit uncomfortable today is that Penny and I leave a fair bit of room for silence. In groups we have a tendency to rush in and fill the silence and I am as guilty of that as the next person. What we are really trying to do is hold a space for connection and, ultimately, for transformation to occur. We'll do that by allowing silence for reflection and meditation on what has been said. We are going to have some big conversations today and they are worthy of reflection. Penny and I will be trying to hold the silence and I want to encourage you to do that as well.

So, we might as well get started. We have a check-in question today. I would like to invite you to introduce yourself. I know you have done that online but maybe just a brief introduction and an answer to this question: “What is your hope for the time that we will spend together in this research?” I will invite anyone to start … [Teleconference One]

In any multi-participant process focusing on stories, it is important to pay attention to the flow of the conversation. There are three natural phases of conversation but only one phase that is truly comfortable for most groups. We are socialized in conversation primarily to quickly find common ground and to converge on a single resolution. This often happens at the expense of a more exploratory conversation that reveals less certain but more novel possibilities. Particular attention was paid, during the research, to the divergent and emergent stages of the interviews and the teleconferences, in order to encourage new insights by both the researchers and the participants. This entailed holding open the field of inquiry for divergent thinking that is characterized by questions, unpredictability, uncertainty,
expansiveness in thought and combining and enhancing ideas. The emergent phase is often the most challenging phase because it is nonlinear, messy, grey and, at times, uncomfortable. It is often difficult to hold this phase open, as the natural response of participants is to converge on a single best solution, in order to relieve the tension and ambiguity. Convergence occurs naturally as individuals and groups begin to see the evolving path in the emergent phase. The following are some examples of the tension expressed by participants in the divergent and emergent phases of the research:

Lex: I felt I was triggered by the articles on suffering. In that moment, I wondered, why am I reading about genocide in the context of our conversations about leadership? It was jarring.

Jeff: Hmmm … looking at the quote … the difference between the two dimensions. Deciding the kind of person to be is so cumulative from all our experiences. I can’t think of a crisis or a personal moment when I said this is the kind of person I’m going to be.

Kerri: I’m not sure about your question, though. It’s not working for me … I just don’t know.

Jess: That’s a hard question to answer. I guess the answer would be yes.

**Beginning the Interviews**

As stated by Steinar Kvale (1996), interviews at their most basic may be considered conversations. He suggests that the interviewer invites the interviewee to describe what is meaningful in their own words. The interviewer is a “travelling companion” who invites “stories of the lived world” (4). To this succinct description, I would add that together the interviewer and the interviewee attempt to understand and co-construct meaning within the conversation. In later years, Kvale’s (2006) research revealed some of the challenges inherent in qualitative interviewing, particularly
when it focuses on warmth, caring and empowering dialogue. He highlights the power imbalance that can exist and suggests that extraction of knowledge can be the primary motivator, potentially leaving the interviewee feeling coerced and manipulated. It was important from the beginning to ensure that the participants felt they had control over the date and time of each interview, that they knew the topic and questions ahead of time and that they were encouraged to ask questions and to challenge the assumptions of the interviewer. While not perfectly righting the inherent power imbalance, the preceding strategies did a lot to create an environment where people felt free to share their stories and the underlying values and principles they disclosed.

During Interview One, I elaborated on my own role, intention and research questions highlighting the open-ended quality of the inquiry and outlining the nature of the interviewees’ participation. I presented myself to all the participants as someone having a lifelong interest in relational forms of leadership, and I outlined both my professional and academic leadership experience. This beginning account established a provisional basis for understanding and trust.

The inquiry was designed to be an extended conversation over time, with each successive interaction building on the last. The interviews were scheduled (for the most part) every two weeks over a five-month period. I underestimated the amount of time I would need to work with the transcripts (reading and rereading, working with individual and collective storylines, developing field notes, etc.) and understood later in the process the value of comparing and contrasting storylines across different participants’ interviews. Each of the interviews (audiotaped with permission)
was an hour long. All interviews began with a request for a story or a response to an article or quote. Each participant was given the interview topic ahead of time as a means of prompting stories and giving appropriate time for reflection and preparation. The flow of the interview was directed primarily by the interest of the participants as it related to the interview topic. The participants and I “wandered together” in narrative storytelling and appreciative listening (Kvale 1996). Listening and relistening to the interview tapes, both during transcribing and later, helped me to more deeply engage in a subtle listening to and a greater valuing of what participants had so generously shared.

**Holding the Tension**

There was a subtle dance throughout the interviews of holding the tension of “not knowing” that defined this space of inquiry. Despite the seeming solidity of the materials, while defining the research questions and carefully setting up the research relationship (as discussed in the preceding paragraphs), I often felt like I was living in the midst of tension. There was a kind of “bumping against” occurring in the stories as participants articulated their practices in relation to institutional narratives about what it means to be a leader. In the beginning, we skirted around the tension, as if not acknowledging it rendered it invisible. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, the participants and I became more comfortable. As I lived in the midst of the stories, I began to understand that the tension was central to life, to its contexts and situations. Tension is a critical element in relationality and often provides “the cracks or openings for co-composing inquiry spaces” (Clandinin et al. 2009:83).
The participants’ stories often left me feeling a little unsure whether or not I was responding attentively to all that their stories offered. I returned over and over again to the theoretical touchstones, many of which I covered in the previous chapter. As I explored new areas of the literature on relational leadership, systems of the self, identity co-creation and more dialogical ways of being, I hoped to increase my ability to sensitively understand the diverse meanings of the participants’ experiences. At this juncture in the research, I felt appreciative of the length of time the participants committed, as I realized I would need time to understand significant aspects of their lived experience.

Passage …

This inquiry was designed, refined, reflected upon and experienced over time. The preceding text offers some insights into how the research was co-constructed and co-designed by the researchers and by the participants as we gained a more profound knowledge and appreciation of each other. I reviewed the data from the interviews, teleconferences, online journals and discussion board and repeatedly immersed myself in it as I worked to synthesize a meaningful framework. I am hopeful that I have developed an interpretation of the participants’ stories that will feel true to their experience in this research. I am also hopeful that it will be interesting and compelling because it is their stories. As I write the “story” of this dissertation, I am increasingly aware of how embedded I am in all that I write and I am optimistic that it will have meaning for you, the reader. Finally, I recognize that there is no end to the human capacity to find and make meaning throughout life. Like turtles, meaning goes all the way down.
Chapter Three: The Participants

It’s important to underline at the start of this chapter that the learning acquired within a Ph.D. coalesces within the research and its subsequent interpretation. It gets legs, so to speak. What were formerly personal experiences, theories and suppositions, began to take on wholeness as people shared their experiences imbuing depth, meaning and practical wisdom to what was previously knowledge. The participants in this study were well-informed people, actively in the process of making meaning and of fine-tuning interpretations of leadership practice and just decision making. They brought their own ways of knowing the world and enthusiastically participated in the creation of a bricolage of leadership theory and practice. Ann Cunliffe conjectures that

from a dialogic perspective, the theorist is not the only sense-maker, rather all participants in the research conversation are constructing meaning intersubjectively in the moment of conversation. The research subject is not a “subject” at all but an active participant, constructor and interrogator of meaning. [2003:491]

At the time of the first interview, the participants, four women and three men, ranged in age from their late twenties to their mid-sixties. Of the seven, two were working as independent consultants while the other five were engaged in working in large public or private organizations. All, including our youngest participant, had diverse careers and rich experiences with leading in roles where socially-aware decision making was an intentional outcome for the research participants, if not directly for their organizations. Most participants referenced their spouses, significant others, children and grandchildren as critical to their growth as leaders and to their
ongoing sense of identity. One participant described his adult family as his “teachers, friends, deep loves and worry-sources.” Others referenced their partners and children as significant contributors to their intellectual development and their emotional growth as leaders who care passionately for the “other.”

Invitations into this study were based on the participants’ experiences as leaders working to create equitable environments where others can flourish. The participants spanned industries as diverse as healthcare, education, oil and gas, nonprofit, NGO and multi-player interactive gaming. Each of them held, or is currently holding, a formal leadership position within an organization. All were conversant in dealing with complex decision making, multiple demands and pressing contemporary issues that defy facile and easy solutions. The participants were characterized by their passion for embedding the values of dignity and equality for others into the work in which they engage. Although all of them brought a high level of social awareness to their work, within the group there was diversity in the level of direct involvement in social concerns. Some participants dealt directly with people who may be described as without voice and living on the margins, some supported this direct engagement through their leadership. Each participant was open to evolving their understanding of the meanings of leadership and social awareness, while generously sharing their personal and professional experiences, both positive and negative. The group members individually and collectively exhibited an epistemological curiosity and a willingness to engage in dialogue as a process of learning and knowing (Freire 1970). They comprehended that their current meanings of leadership and social awareness were fluid and each was open to being changed.
by the dialogue. Most stated up front that they were willing to explore and challenge
the problematic images that comprise the dominant cultural narratives about leaders
and how that translates (or not) into creating egalitarian and respectful environments
for others. To an individual, they embodied intellectual courage, penetrating and
insightful perceptions, humility and humanity.

The following vignettes outline the participants’ personal life histories and
experiences as they relate to understanding leaders and leadership, other,
otherness and othering. These short introductions offer context for the themes and
storylines that I describe in the next chapter.

GARY

“Fundamentally it comes down to dignity and justice. What are the things we need to
create a world where that’s possible for people?”

When I first met Gary, I was impressed by his genuine interest in others. I had
heard of his work in facilitation and public consultation many times before we met
formally. He is highly respected for the quality of his work, as well as his
characteristic integrity. Penny and I met Gary for lunch in Rossland, B.C., in the
spring of 2012, to chat with him about our research, among other things. Gary’s
warmth and openness made me feel at ease immediately. He is a long-time resident
of the Kootenays and is someone whom residents recognize and greet affectionately
when they meet him on the street.

At the time of our meeting, Gary was the Director of Community Engagement
for Columbia Basin Trust (CBT). The CBT is an organization that supports the
development of the social, economic and environmental well-being of the citizens of the Columbia Basin. In early 2014, at the start of our research engagement, Gary had returned to his own consulting practice and was considering how he would balance work with his many varied interests. He does not have his life “bucketed” in tidy classifications and therefore draws on stories of his career, his family life, his history and his multiple interests as he articulates his passion for leading in socially-aware ways. His inclusive style, his interest in others and his ability to tell an interesting and compelling story made him an integral part of the development of community among the research participants.

Gary has long been involved in social justice causes; his career is highlighted by over 20 years in both public sector and NGO positions. The principles of dignity, respect and of really “seeing” others was inspired early on in Gary by the civil rights movement in the United States. As an adolescent growing up in Michigan, Gary became aware of the negative, stereotypical constructions of what it meant to be black in the 1960s. This was a jarring juxtaposition to the world he knew and understood. The civil rights drives triggered a profound reaction to segregation and inequality that is foundational in him and, to this day, underpins his actions and decision making.

Through our conversations, Gary articulated a well-formed understanding of what it means to lead in complex environments while holding others foremost. Rather than seeing leadership in the classical sense as the “strong hand at the helm,” Gary sees it as “situational, experiential and guided by what kind of person to be more than simply the correct action.” He emphasized the role of context in voicing that while
we can hold a particular perspective on leadership, how it is enacted in the messiness and complexity of our day-to-day existence will look different leader to leader. No cookie cutters here.

LEX

“Leadership is about me. How do I show up? How do I listen deeply? How do I create a space that allows other perspectives and other ways of being? How do I focus on the present moment?”

I first met Lex in 2013 while working with a group of educators and healthcare professionals on the creation of a symposium for leaders concerned with positive mental health in youth. Lex was the committee chair and so Penny and I had interactions with him over a period of months as the symposium took shape. This was a complex day to facilitate and it required the active participation of the planning committee in inviting the community to be present and to engage in meaningful dialogue. Lex’s leadership of this event, his profound understanding of the process of invitation and his ability to listen and engage others were pivotal to the success of the day.

Being socially aware has a long history with Lex, despite the fact that he described himself as a latecomer to social mindfulness. He mentioned an early relationship that introduced him to gender equity issues, of which, as a boy, growing up in a household of three boys, he was unambiguously unaware. Although Lex described himself as a late-blooming activist, in his early years he sought out experiences that would forge his deep empathy and be foundational to his thoughtful
understanding of equity and the circumstances of others. Travelling through South America, he experienced the care and hospitality of those living in poverty. Lex also chose to volunteer with the destitute and dying in India and, at another career juncture, to work with immigrants and people living in poverty in the downtown eastside of Vancouver.

Dialogue with Lex was one of exploring the thin places, places where the visible and invisible worlds fold in on themselves, places where people experience joy, mystery and a close connection between the temporal and the spiritual. Lex was very clear that strong emotions provide an opportunity to explore our belief systems.

“Any negative experience is an opportunity for reflection ... a big part of all of this is the absolute belief that we are the other. So anytime I make a judgment, it’s a judgment on myself.” Being in conversation with Lex, was in itself, a kind of meditation.

KERRI

“And that work of becoming more courageous and acting with more integrity? That’s personal work. That’s the work we do on ourselves, with ourselves.”

When I reflect on my relationship with Kerri, one of the outstanding things is her buoyant energy and her boundless curiosity. She holds an attitude of wonder and interest that helps her to continuously find fresh understandings about herself and the world. Penny and I met Kerri in 2013 while working on a facilitation that focused on creating positive mental health for youth within schools and communities. As a liaison between local government and the healthcare system, Kerri played an integral role on the planning committee working to ensure that we had the right
people at the table. Initially, she expressed some doubt about what we were trying to achieve and honestly shared her perspective on the school system and its failure to provide a safety net for kids who were “other.” At that time, I was struck by her ability to articulate her thoughts and doubts about the process we were embarking on without feeling like she had to explain or equivocate. This curiosity and transparency translated especially effectively to her participation in the research. As a research participant, Kerri engaged with a characteristic honesty and never shied away from stating that she wasn’t clear on a question or text and was comfortable asking for a reframe. As I grew to know her better, I could see that the concepts of leadership, social awareness and children’s rights were like a three-stranded helix at the core of her. She strongly believes that “children thrive best in the context of a community” and her personal mission statement is “to contribute to creating a world that makes sense for children.”

Kerri holds a master’s degree in Leadership from Royal Roads University in Victoria, B.C. Among the research participants, she held the most formal education in leadership studies and had spent time reflecting deeply on the subject. “Having that foundation was helpful in putting my own personal views into a larger understanding of what leadership meant.” Her education, in tandem with her leadership experience, enabled her to articulate her philosophy of leadership.
I think of myself as being what is referred to in the literature as a servant leader. More like leading from behind or leading with a coaching methodology or leading with encouragement, that kind of thing ... it’s not a lot of pulling from the front, it’s more like I’ve got your back and we’re going together.

Despite her clarity on a topic that is highly contested and often obscure, she was neither glib nor inauthentic in her responses to the research questions. She grappled with the concepts of meaning making, social awareness and leadership with a characteristic honesty and openness that lent a freshness and vitality to each conversation.

Kerri’s sense of dignity, equality and fairness was honed early in her observation of the haves and have-nots in her home community of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. An early memory for Kerri was of playing at being poor people. A process she describes as literally playing out a childlike fantasy of something she had an awareness of but didn’t understand. Later, she would explore issues of poverty, ethnicity and gender equity with the same vibrant curiosity.

Kerri is an “all in” person, parent and leader. She unreservedly shared her struggles as a single parent and how that shaped and influenced her principles and practices as a leader. Kerri deepened the learning experience throughout the research by directly connecting her beliefs and her experiences to the concepts of leaders and leadership in a deeply personal and meaningful way.
JEFF

“How do you respond when someone holds values that are repugnant and different than yours? How do you respond when the values are viscerally opposite to where you’re standing?”

Jeff was the only research participant whom Penny and I had not met face-to-face prior to our research. He was highly recommended to us as someone who worked in the space between human rights and business objectives, translating the desires of a given community into language that complements a business agenda. We were both delighted when he agreed to be part of our research, as he had much to share with regard to moving socially-aware leadership practices and human rights forward within the context of business. Among all the research participants, Jeff is easily the most fluent in translating social concerns in a way that holds both currency and credibility to the business community. He acutely understands the priorities of business and has spent much of his career making compatible the priority of human need with the objective of making a profit.

Jeff was quick to describe his early years as growing up in a “comfortable family” in a “comfortable town” and without a great awareness of inequality. A lover of music, his awakening came during his university years when he was introduced to Amnesty International through the soundtrack to a 1979 benefit concert, the Secret Policeman’s Ball. Many people, including musicians such as Bob Geldof and Bono, attribute their interest in social rights and activism to their exposure to Amnesty. Jeff recalled that he learned about torture, prisoners of conscience and human rights
abuses in Tibet, South Africa and Latin America. “And I came to realize that ordinary people were working on major, global issues—and making a difference.”

As a leader, Jeff is notable in his pragmatism. In keeping with many of the other participants, he described the challenge of holding his values of equality and fairness in the face of indifference. He sees himself as somewhat conflict avoidant but also recalled stories of when he countered resistance by helping his organization understand the reputational risk a certain course of action may hold. It is this ability to translate what others might delineate as the “right way” or the “just” thing to do, into an examination of potential risk that makes it possible for the business world to hear and see things differently. This strategic repositioning requires intellect and courage, characteristics that Jeff embodies.

In the end, does it matter why you do it [uphold social justice]? If the end impact is the same, does it matter? I don’t care what their core values are, as long as they continue to deliver a strong profit by paying attention to social values. As long as companies are addressing these issues their motivations are of less interest to me.

Jeff was easily the most cautious of the group. His speech was measured and his reflections thoughtful. When taking a tough stance on how he perceived NGOs to vilify the extractive industry, Jeff expressed himself well and clearly but came back to Penny and me in the next session to say that he hoped he hadn’t been too controversial. Jeff’s career experiences as a Communications Officer made him especially sensitive to the language that Penny and I used in our coaching and our conference calls. He felt that some of what we said was too theoretical, full of jargon and exclusionary. He wondered if there wasn’t a clearer, more concise way to ask questions or to describe things. Jeff’s clarity in thinking and his directness
challenged both Penny and me to really consider how the language we were using might constrain rather than open up the dialogue. More than once Jeff courageously suggested that the language, for him, was obscuring rather than illuminating concepts. In the group sessions, he led the way for others to voice similar concerns, thereby enriching the dialogue.

NICOLE

“This could be my child. I take ownership over all the world’s children. These kids are our kids. Would you want this for your own child? Is this acceptable?”

My first impression, on meeting Nicole, was one of great vitality. She has an extremely dynamic and engaging presence and the space around her resonates with positive energy. Penny had previously met Nicole through community social justice events and fundraisers. When we emailed her to see if she might be interested in joining the research group, she replied affirmatively. Because of her geographical proximity we were able to have a rare face-to-face conversation with her about our research in more depth. It was enlightening to see Nicole in the context of her work. Her office is filled with pictures of people she has met around the world, artwork and brightly-coloured weavings that hold special memories for her. The overall aesthetic is one of warmth and plurality.

Nicole leads the Corporate Citizenship Program for a division of a large corporation. In this role, she directs corporate giving on behalf of her organization, travelling around the world building relationships and funding causes that have great impact for many people and communities. Her busy schedule made it challenging for
her to find the time to post in the journal or contribute to the online discussion. Despite this, she was committed to our one-to-one sessions and we learned a lot about how leaders make tough decisions involving vulnerable people. Nicole daily manages the tension between her desire to do right and good socially and environmentally, while simultaneously meeting business objectives for corporate giving. It is a bit of a dance. “You identify the key stakeholders and you examine the business. Do we have any special skills or abilities that will move the needle? That’s where we focus ... I want to see the results and that we’re actually moving the needle and supporting something meaningful and real.”

Nicole’s perspective on leadership is that it requires great humility and the ability to connect in a meaningful way with others. Early in our conversations and consistently throughout, Nicole emphasized the importance of humility and an awareness of all that we have in the Western world. She highlighted the Western narrative, which suggests we can do or achieve anything with hard work, and countered that this view can only be realized by the privileged who are beyond the struggle for daily survival. She suggested that this self-focussed perspective keeps us from realizing all the gifts and freedoms that we have in the present moment.

When reading through my research transcriptions, Nicole emerged as a woman in motion. Not content with the way things have always been, Nicole strives for positive, forward momentum. A phrase that appeared repeatedly in the text was “moving the needle.” I came to realize that for her this signified positive, measureable improvements in the lives of people and communities. She expressed her philosophy of leadership through the stories she told about how she engages with
others to make things happen. “You have to be able to stand on your own convictions. You can’t be rolled over. You also can’t make people feel bad but you have to show them a different path. If they don’t choose the path that’s okay but I’m going to go ahead and move the needle.”

DORRIE

“I always ask myself, did you have the full story? Did you give her all that you could? Did you have all the information? Was the decision just?”

I had the gift of spending time with Dorrie while working on a project for a client in Northern B.C. Penny and I were invited to work with a group of leaders who had responsibility at varying levels for the care of people living with Alzheimer’s and dementias. As part of our contract, we took this group to site visits around B.C. to introduce them to current best practices within the industry and to create opportunities for the development of meaningful relationships. Dorrie has a stellar reputation as a pioneer in the field of aged care and we brought these leaders to spend time with her and her staff in the spring of 2013.

Dorrie and her team provide care for 72 people living with Alzheimer’s and related dementias. Dorrie sees her work as “a canvas on which I am painting a template for significant cultural change in residential care settings.” She and her staff are advocates for relationships based on care and authentic partnerships with residents, their families and the community. It was a privilege to talk with her and to listen to her articulate a philosophy of leadership focused on promoting dignity, respect and equity.
Dorrie engaged in research with us with great willingness. She is an open and receptive learner and is generous in her observations of others. She mentioned the saving grace of having a sense of humour many times in our conversations and underlined that belief with her infectious laugh. “I use humour, sometimes quite dark. That sort of keeps me going. There’s nothing like a good laugh!” When talking about her philosophy of supporting and working alongside the team, she says, “I used to laugh that it wasn’t Tim Hortons rolling up the rim, it was us rolling up our sleeves.”

Dorrie grew up in a small town on Vancouver Island and was aware at an early age of the racial injustice that existed in her community toward aboriginal children. “I was shaped by being in a community where the children came on separate buses ... it was a feeling of sadness, watching the separateness and these very shy and vulnerable people getting off the bus ... I wanted to demystify that script by becoming friends with these kids.”

The themes of demystifying, of illuminating, of becoming clear were repeated in Dorrie’s narratives about leadership. “I consciously try to have a living dialogue, to listen, to understand and to be careful of the monologue.”

Among the many reasons that Penny and I had for hoping that Dorrie would join us in our inquiry, not least was her leadership wisdom and her propensity to ground her perspective in stories. Whether it was describing the difference between being and doing or thinking deeply about Paulo Freire’s (1970) notion of humanization and dehumanization, Dorrie always illustrated bigger conceptions with a narrative nugget. A gifted storyteller, Dorrie captivated us with real life, everyday applications of the heady concepts we discussed. Her purposeful linking of events
and ideas significantly deepened the learning for Penny and me. Her stories prompted us to share our stories, beautifully exemplifying how the co-construction of meaning occurs in narrative research (Reissman 2008).

JESS

“How can I be present in this situation, fully engage with someone else, identify the issue at hand and begin to problem solve? What can I take away? What can they take away? What can we build together?”

I met Jess in December of 2010 while exploring opportunities with Community Enterprise Solutions in Guatemala. CE Solutions is a nonprofit initiative that identifies, trains, equips and supports individuals and organizations to provide sustainable solutions that address long-standing rural, economic, health and education problems. Penny and I were there to see if there was a fit between their organization and the Acacia Group mission to develop socially responsible leaders. Our guide to the work they were doing in Nebaj was Jessica Reading. Jess was an American living and working in Guatemala and helping to develop local entrepreneurs to build successful businesses. While there, we were able to witness her natural ability to connect with a diverse range of people, to listen deeply and to act collaboratively.

Jess was the youngest participant in our research and is currently an assistant director in the Institute for Entrepreneurship at the University of Miami in Cincinnati, Ohio. My experience with Jess was one of words and ideas tumbling out as a very active brain grappled with the complexity of the topics we were exploring. Jess
would often call in for our coaching session while driving long distances, making the session an uninterrupted free-flowing exchange of deep thinking, sharing experiences, testing out ideas and making connections. Jess has intentionally forged her identity as a leader who cares passionately about others. She has deliberately sought out opportunities that required her to live at a subsistence level, helping her to understand in a visceral way the challenges of the “have-not.” The call to leadership for Jess is truly about seeing what needs to be done and providing access to enable others. “I think it reaffirmed that access was one of the most important things to improving the lives of others. In order to improve access you actually have to have had access. There really is a group of haves and have-nots. Dragging yourself up by the bootstraps is a myth.”

Jess grew up in the privileged suburb of La Jolla, California, and describes her upbringing as “simple and humble” rather than “lavish and luxurious.” Despite the relative comfort of her surroundings, she was exposed at an early age to a rich diversity of language, culture and ethnicities. Cared for by a Latin American caregiver, she learned to count to ten in Spanish before learning it in English. It wasn’t until moving to Ohio for college that she began to notice a paucity of ethnic diversity, as well as a myriad of assumptions, stigmas and tensions. Her experience in the Heartland led her to become a passionate advocate for the rights of immigrants struggling with the complexities of “what is right, fair and just to those who were born on different soil?”

As a leader, Jess is a connector and believes that relationships are critical and intertwined, that growth and development are reciprocal processes happening in
relationship with others. Easily the most deeply spiritual of the group, Jess defines herself as “religious” and describes her faith as the beginning and ending of all introspection about her life’s purpose and meaning. She sees leadership as an ongoing process of increasing self-awareness and reflection and of asking, “what can I do in this moment?”

**Passage …**

All of the participants who contributed to this inquiry were incredibly generous with their time and appeared truly comfortable in their own leadership. Each of them took the commitment they had made to the research and to Penny and me very seriously. They thought our research questions were significant and they dignified them by sharing their memories and deeply personal experiences with us in pursuit of a greater understanding. In response, Penny and I were fascinated both by their stories and by the courage each of them demonstrated in sifting through sometimes painful, always fruitful, memories.

A commonality among this group was their participation in activities that did not reflect a professional interest and yet provided them with insight into their experiences of leadership and socially-aware decision making. From a passion for music, to running, biking, paddling, volleyball and travelling, each participant articulated lessons learned from other events and accomplishments that imbued our conversations with a depth and richness.

This exploration of relational leadership was never intended to produce a comprehensive model or definition. Instead, the concepts explored by the
participants and the stories they shared signify an underlying shift in the way we make meaning about the role of leaders, leadership and the primacy of social concerns.

The ethos of this research experience and of these particular participants could be captured by a deep understanding of alterity and a characteristic humility in their constructions of themselves. Leonard Cohen—Canadian poet, novelist and singer/songwriter—is also a master at imbuing his works with a sense of alterity, a deep awareness of other and of humility. Cohen pays a tribute to Hank Williams in a track titled, “Tower of Song” (1988). He suggests that Williams is the greater at interpreting loneliness and therefore is “a hundred floors above me, In the tower of song.” I offer that each of these leaders was “a hundred floors above me” in their understanding of leadership.
Chapter Four: Story Lines and Related Meanings

Stories are peripatetic; they are told and retold and shaped and influenced in the telling. Stories transform over time, opening up new possibilities and bringing new things into being. In this inquiry, I derived three primary storylines that characterize the ways that the participants made meaning of their experiences of leading relationally. These are: (1) Other, Otherness and Othering; (2) Human’s Being; and (3) Dreaming the Impossible. These storylines address the conditional and relational aspects of the participants’ identity constructions relative to leader practice and the ideal of leadership. The descriptions of the participants in Chapter Three provide background for these emerging storylines.

In this chapter, I foreground these themes and offer a more in-depth study of their texts. Excerpts from the transcripts are chosen to illuminate relevant thematic content. Following Cunliffe, I consider that “leadership becomes a process of thinking more critically and reflexively about ourselves, our actions, and the situations we find ourselves in” (2009:88) and with Richardson et al. I see that “becoming a self means internalizing the ongoing conversation or dialogue from the world around us” (1998:509). This chapter is an iterative account of the participants’ stories, my observations and the theory that interweaves the accounts. I have selected a limited number of narratives from the data, focusing on the conversations that most related to the participants’ self-narratives and to their leadership practices (Interviews Two, Four, Six and Eight). I am acknowledging both the particularity of narrative truth (Bruner 1990) and the narrative nature of human experience (Shamir
and Eilam 2005) by reading them as “wholes.” In the final section of this chapter, I consider the thematic aspects of the participants’ narratives and offer reflections on the significance of their perspectives. As stated in Chapter Two, in order to easily distinguish the participants' voices, I have used a different font. I have also used “…“ to denote a pause in speaking and “[…]” where I have merged the text in order to sequence a series of thoughts.

**Other, Otherness and Othering (Interview Two)**

Early in our conversations, during the second set of interviews, the participants and I focused on personal stories of leaders who, for them, were influential. This was most helpful as it highlighted what each participant found both exemplary (and not) in their lived experiences. The narratives served to help me form a baseline or starting point for understanding what practices, for them, represented leaders and leadership. This particular set of interviews was pivotal to exploring the constellation of questions I held about how certain leaders were able to hold human concerns and relationships primary as they engaged in their work. I was quite clear from the beginning that I wasn’t interested in theories, models or steps, but rather in the stories that illustrated their perspectives. Given that many of our conversations were reflective in nature, I invited people via email to prepare for the session by reflecting on the following:
Our experiences with other leaders have influenced our way of being as leaders. Tell me a story about a leader that you have been directly involved with whose leadership held concern for others foremost and has been inspirational for you. What were the practices that were most meaningful to you? What was the impact of their behaviours on you? What was the impact on others?

Similarly, tell me a story about a leader that you have been directly involved with who has not demonstrated care for others. What were the practices that were challenging for you? How have you allowed that to influence your leadership practice? What was the impact of this kind of leadership on you and on others?

Meaning dimensions that I came to identify with the Other, Otherness and Othering storyline included: respecting, engaging and listening to others, seeing oneself as equal to others and seeking outcomes that reflect others’ priorities.

**Other**

Many of the stories reflected highly politicized environments, where the way forward was not clear and where simple solutions were not adequate to meet the complexity dictated by the circumstances. Cunliffe and Eriksen argue that what is central to leading from a relational perspective is an awareness of the finely nuanced qualities of relationships, of leaderly practice “as a way of being and relating to others” (2011:1432). Many of the comments that I have chosen to emphasize in this section illustrate the practice of talking with rather than to others. The following text highlights the lived, practical experiences of the study participants as they moved through reflecting, rethinking and refining their perspectives of leaderly practice. The stories were highly intersubjective and demonstrated how respecting, listening and engaging with others enables shared experiences and leads to new forms of
consciousness (Ashman and Lawler 2008). Beginning points in the participants’ stories of influential practices most frequently had, at their nexus, the ability to listen.

**Respecting, Engaging and Listening**

The participants chose to reflect on and share stories where the leader’s practices in engaging others demonstrated a high level of respect. For example, Gary’s and Lex’s stories emphasized the impact of listening with an egalitarian respect for the other.

**GARY**

Gary’s first story centred on a leader whose work had a justice focus but was largely administrative. Gary had observed this individual in a variety of social justice settings and was influenced by his unwavering commitment to changing the world.

He’s been in the same position for more than 20 years and I think it would be very hard for him to find someone that he didn’t respect, engage and listen to in the work that he needs to do. In watching him, I think he is really thorough for bringing people along with what needs to happen and listening to the degree where he feels confident that he understands what needs to happen … bending over backwards really to let people have a voice and engage them in the decisions that are being made.

Gary related that the way this leader engaged in his work demonstrated a deep commitment to the value of human rights. Interestingly, he suggested that because of this leader’s deep commitment to others and to understanding others, the work often progressed slowly. I asked him if there was tension between the speed that we are normalized to use when making decisions and the actual process of engaging people. “Yeah, I think there is … sometimes it’s kinder to be quicker but I think the part I’m
inspired by is his clear track record of respect in the sense that things have been done fairly, honestly, openly seeking the best answer rather than some other agenda.”

The specific story that Gary chose to tell involved a financial crunch in the organization and the resulting decision to downsize. “I would say, in this case, to a certain extent, he almost let the 50 staff make the decision. There was so much input from staff that by the time the changes were made, there was some unhappiness, but there were no mysteries and no edict from on high.”

What made Gary’s thoughtful narrative of leadership so compelling was that he chose to highlight practices that he, on reflection, understood as demonstrating a deep commitment to the values of respect, honesty and transparency. Gary stressed how this leader would work hard to bring groups to a place where reciprocity and mutuality in decision making were possible. When I asked if he consciously or intentionally emulated these leaderly practices he responded affirmatively.

I was doing some work with another international company and really copied, I would say, his approach to ask who is willing to meet after dinner to see if we can dig down deeper and resolve where we are all coming from? So that was me, really taking his practice and trying to get the best result by bringing people along.

Gary’s story epitomizes relationality, the axiom of dialogism. It highlights the primacy of relationships within their socio-cultural context and the leaderly practice of engaging with others (alterity) to negotiate meaning and outcomes (dialogicality).

Nearly all of the stories centred on others who were part of marginalized groups, people who often lacked a voice and for whom the outcomes held significant consequence. Lex’s first story illustrated a way of being in this milieu.
LEX

The leader that Lex chose to highlight worked in the downtown eastside of Vancouver at a community centre known for its social, recreational and cultural programs for low-income adults. What impressed Lex was this leader’s ability to openly engage in dialogue with others without becoming invulnerable to their circumstances.

I have seen him in interactions and conversations with people whose access was being blocked or barred for some reason, to looking at how particular programs were being administered; for example, revamping the food system from deep fryers to healthy foods and negotiating that with people who were initially very resistant. He was able to be there in a way that was clear and strong, completely present and engaging, bringing folks into those conversations.

What was most striking to Lex was this leader’s capacity for admitting that others’ perspectives might be right, even when in opposition to his own. He also stressed the practice of staying open emotionally and intellectually to multiple perspectives.

I think those two pieces lay together, staying open at that emotional level and able to cry at the tragedies ... I observe that it is a practice or an awareness that you don’t have to have your shield up all the time ... he is able to hold that and also to have it in a place that is not immobilizing emotionally. What’s important is recognizing the pain that there is and the wisdom that there is and still be able to be present and do the work that you have to do in that moment.

I asked Lex if he intentionally emulated this leader’s practice or if it was more intuitive that he did some of the same things.
There are definitely times where I see this kind of interaction and I think that this is so open and honest and present that it resonates. I recognize that I want to be that. I’m not sure that I recited it to myself but more acknowledged that it was something pretty special. So then it gets highlighted somewhere in our wonderful, internal structures.

Throughout the conversation, Lex reflected on the intentional versus intuitive nature of learning. I observed that the story was really captivating and the word empathy sprang to mind, the kind of empathy that shines out of someone who is really listening to another. “I think that is right on and I would have gotten to that word for sure. He is deeply empathetic and is able to hold that in a place that is not immobilizing.”

At this point, I asked Lex if there was something about this leader’s capacity to stay present and open while faced with such a diverse range of challenges that spoke to him of leadership. He offered the following to ensure that I understood the primary storyline of his narrative.

It does in one sense and I think that, in another, and this sounds really Pollyannaish, that that’s the way we really are as humans. If we actually let go of the burdens that we choose to carry, then we would be face-to-face in real time, in the present. It’s admirable and it’s shocking that it doesn’t happen all the time. Or maybe it does but I just don’t see it.

**Seeing Oneself as Equal to Others**

Inherent, both implicitly and explicitly, in the text of the interviews is the notion of others as equal to oneself. This has been investigated extensively in dialogism and narrative theory (see Ricoeur 1992; Richardson et al. 1998; Salgado and Clegg 2011). Ricoeur expresses this idea by suggesting that “I cannot myself have self-esteem unless I esteem others as myself” (1992:193). This statement refers not to
an ethical imperative, but rather to the view of self-narration espousing that “esteem of the other as oneself and the esteem of oneself as another” are deeply correspondent (194). Ricoeur enlarges this conception by proposing that ethical selfhood is inextricably interwoven with otherness suggesting that self “implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other, that instead one passes into the other” (3). Kerri’s leadership story expresses this notion beautifully.

KERRI

The leader Kerri chose to underscore as deeply influential was an individual whose compassion was seamlessly integrated in his practice. Interestingly, this person was at the bottom of Kerri’s list when she was thinking through the stories she would tell. But, in the rethinking, it became clear that the way-of-being of this leader and the integration of his practices were the ones that most clearly shaped and influenced her own practice. This vignette took place early in Kerri’s life and had enormous influence on her way of seeing and of being with others.
I moved to Montreal when I was 20 to go to the National Theatre School of Canada. It was a three-year program but after a year I was kicked out. So there I was in the city with no school, my dream had been dashed and I was like, what now? I went on welfare for a few months and tried to get work at a natural foods store down the road. But I didn’t get the job right away. The guy who managed the store was old enough to be my dad. He was a quiet Jewish guy and, to me, he seemed different. Growing up on the prairies, I didn’t have much experience being around Jews but in Montreal there were many. He seemed like all business at first, really serious, but then I got to know him as time went on. I worked for him for over a year, I think. One day he asked me if I remembered that the first day I walked in and wanted a job, he wouldn’t hire me. He said, “If you had told me you were on welfare I would have given you a job immediately” … he just had this way of being, he wanted everyone to be treated fairly and treated well. I remember there was a single mom with her son who would come into the store to buy her groceries and he gave me private instructions that if she ever came to my till I was to give her ten percent off her order. I was like, “Why?” I was so young and I didn’t really understand. He said, “Well she’s a struggling single mom.” You know that kind of stuff was important to him.

Kerri’s manager became a mentor to her in the year that she worked in the natural foods store and is still a close friend more than 20 years later. His influence in her life spanned both the professional and the personal. As she grew to know him, he expressed his philosophy of life and affirmed that Kerri had all that she needed to be successful.

Maybe this sounds cliché but he really believed in me … he would talk about how important health is. He ran this natural health food store, he was a vegetarian, he ate all organic and he was physically active. He would say to me, what you eat is super important to your health, but it’s not even as important as what you do with your body […] but the thing that trumps it all is your mental attitude […] you have that good, positive, mental attitude. Just keep that and you will be fine.

I asked Kerri if she was conscious of emulating this leader’s exquisite sensitivity to others, his way of ensuring that others had what they needed, whether that was groceries or affirmation.
How does it happen that I integrate the best parts of him? I have this idea that it comes into my mind and it resonates there. I don’t know. I mean I never ever remember saying to myself, oh, I have to remember this or I should write this down … you know, that never happened but it seemed, because it was worthy, that it stuck around.

Nicole’s story echoed some of the themes that surfaced in Kerri’s story. Both women chose leaders who transparently held principles and values about the dignity and worth of others and whose practices led to seeing and valuing others. Kerri’s leader exemplified a way of being in the mundaneness of life, a leader whose actions transformed the everyday by affirming other’s worth.

**NICOLE**

Nicole chose a leader who had the opportunity to demonstrate the practice of listening to and respecting others, while simultaneously validating others as worthy of equal rights and privileges. He is a retired labour lawyer whose passion for social justice and human rights led him to found a non-governmental organization (NGO) in Ethiopia that addresses the need for education, basic infrastructure, gender equity and food security. Nicole and I began our conversation by talking about leadership and local engagement.
The leader that I want to talk about has an incredible development model for the empowerment of local people. Something he holds dearly is women and the rights of women and children. He has probably been my greatest influence in this arena and someone who has really inspired me in what I do. One day I received an email from him saying that in his retirement years he never thought he would be fighting for women's and girls' menstruation rights. He was in Northern Ethiopia in a really remote area asking women what their most pressing issues were. He discovered it was the lack of access for girls to handle menstruation and that when they hit puberty they had to quit school. There were no bathrooms, no pads, no tampons or anything for the girls. So he sat down with about 30 women to discuss menstruation rights. He was looking for a solution that would fit culturally and with the community. They piloted a project that enabled 5,000 girls to go to school in the first year.

When I asked Nicole what kind of skill was required for an “old white guy” to have that conversation she responded:

Like, how was he able to do this? I think he listens. So even though he’s a brilliant guy who knows a lot of things he doesn’t go in with a solution. He actually just listens. He doesn’t put himself on a pedestal. He really believes that everyone is equal, therefore, they should have an equal voice especially when it has something to do with their own future. He believes they should be leading the conversation. In this case, most of the women were illiterate and probably had to drop out of school in grade five or six but he values them and he values hearing what they thought would be best for their girls and their futures. So he really listens to communities and to individuals and he really is a big believer in equality and that he is not the person with the solutions but that he can catalyze action and help with implementation. He is the one finding the resources and finding the people necessary to make it happen. I think listening is key in that kind of scenario.

As I grew to know Nicole on a deeper level, I became aware of her strong predisposition to action. As a leader in a large corporate setting, she is required to move quickly in her decisions. In this narrative, she lightly touched on motivation but extrapolated her deeper insights and observations about this leader from his observable actions.
He doesn’t go into a community with an agenda and say, “Oh, you need a school.” He goes into a community and wants to hear what all the stakeholders believe is necessary for that community’s success. For him it’s about valuing what people have to say and then helping to find a way to help them reach their goals.

Nicole went on in our conversation to mention a few other leaders who had similarly inspired her. I was curious about whether she reflected on their practices and emulated them.

Yes I definitely think that I do. I consider everyone around me as some kind of mentor. So, for me, mentorship doesn’t mean you put someone on a pedestal; instead, you see their great qualities and try to see if you can put them into your way of being. So I absolutely strive for that. I always go back to ego. As I look back on my early 20s, it was my ego that really came to the surface as I tried to gain confidence. Then I realized that confidence expresses itself externally but is internal. I began to see what real confidence is. I look back at my early 20s and see how competitive I was and how it was a superficial way of being. Through watching other people, I now realize what it is really about. It’s being at peace with who you are, being humble, being a great listener and learning as much as you can from as many people as you can and moving forward in life in that way.

Nicole’s story underlined the importance of listening and valuing others and, as with the other stories, her choice of story exemplified what she believes on a deep level to be leaderly. Nicole’s reflexive ruminations about her own growth reflected what Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) refer to as character.

Character is embedded and expressed within conversations not as traits or constructs but as a way-of-being-in-relation-to-others that brings a moral responsibility to treat people as human beings, of having “a heart”, appreciating others and encouraging them to grow and learn from each other. [1433]
Seeking Outcomes that Reflect Others’ Priorities

Jeff’s story of influential leadership echoed Nicole’s in that, it was a recounting of leadership that revealed a strategic concern for others, as well as the singular desire to build a world that respects and dignifies others. In this story, many of the same principles are present but recounted in a more strategic and less interpersonal way. Jeff’s discourse, in general, was more objective than the other participants’. Perhaps this is a reflection of a career spent communicating strategy and intent on behalf of large organizations. From the first conversation with Jeff, it was apparent that he had spent much of his career balancing his strongly-held ideals, forged as a student, with the standard of pragmatism characteristic of many corporations. Jeff’s choice of leadership story reflected the priorities of holding fast to a moral narrative of what is right and good, while seeking outcomes that reflect the priorities of those without a voice.

JEFF

The leader who Jeff chose for his story, is a senior leader for an international non-governmental organization that reports human rights violations worldwide and supports global awareness and action. What struck Jeff about this leader was his ability to consistently uphold the ideals of human rights, dignity and respect in the face of political and corporate narratives that seek to rationalize and diminish these goals.
In all our lives, we can rationalize or become very pragmatic and say, well, we would love to see human rights for all mankind but, really, given the current government in Iran, Burma, Central Africa (you pick a country or jurisdiction) ... we can only hope for baby steps. This leader was always inspiring, in the sense that the approach he brings or the mindset he brings is that there is an ideal world that we want to live in and that we have to strive for. He believes that it is not the role of his organization to be pragmatic ... he believes the role is to be idealists. To strive for the world we want to live in. I found it very inspiring and motivating that it’s okay to carry these big ideals. It’s okay to do that. In fact, it’s necessary for some of us to do that. Because if we all just fall back on what’s pragmatic, what’s possible, what’s realistic, then we won’t see the change in the world that we really hope to see. I found that very inspiring.

Jeff went on to articulate that his leader was also able to support and celebrate the small wins.

This is not meant to oversimplify his philosophy. I mean he would celebrate the small gains on the road in that journey. It’s not about all or nothing. It’s not like we have to go to the moon or the stars ... he would celebrate the minor achievements or the modest improvements but never to have your work or your ideals compromised by the constant reminder or the criticism of ... well, that’s just not pragmatic. In his mind, he wouldn’t lose the value of the incremental change. It was more: don’t lose your passion for the big change.

I wondered if Jeff felt that his role required a different way of holding to the ideal, he answered:

Yes. My role was to engage Canadian companies doing business in zones of conflict, particularly the oil and gas industry. My NGO would present its philosophy to these companies in a very pure way saying that you will do business in a way that respects human rights and you will choose not to do business in countries or situations where you can’t do that. Meanwhile, in my role, I would be engaging with countries already doing business in Sudan, Guatemala, Indonesia ... I would start a dialogue with them, saying you are already there and there is corruption and environmental damage, so ... I would engage with them on a pragmatic level saying here are the steps you could be taking to minimize the potential impact on the environment and on human rights. So it was both.
When asked if he emulated or embodied his leader’s steadfast vision of an ideal world, he replied:

I think in the role that I played, I think I still approached it in a pragmatic way but I think it gave me a foundation to approach that pragmatism. The vision was a bedrock ... or a do not pass this line ... because you could have a number of very persuasive corporate leaders or corporate individuals who you are interacting with who say, “Well, Jeff, all that you say is very nice but the reality, on the ground in Nigeria, is like this” ... but it gave, like I say, a kind of bedrock or foundation to be able to say ... we don’t go past this, we don’t go to the place where we say, “I guess in your case a human rights violation is unavoidable.” It gave a foundation to not pass that.

At that point in the interview, we talked about the tension involved in holding fast to the ideal, while simultaneously working with people who want action and forward movement. He explained:

Well, there was tension, in that I was a bit unusual in the NGO world, in sort of doing outreach to corporations. For a number of this NGO’s supporters and staff members, human rights are abstinence. So you don’t engage with corporations, you bash them, you shame them, you attack them, you campaign against them, because human rights are absolute. There are no grey areas. My background was largely corporate, so I saw things in more shades of grey than some of my colleagues. So there was a tension in that.

Jeff’s story typified the “wicked problem.” His narrative underlined the complexity and intractability of challenges that have no unilinear solutions (Grint 2005). Interestingly, Jeff’s leadership story rarely referred to relationality but more the clash of differing ideologies. A notable difference in his narrative was that there were no examples of how this leader practised holding the ideal of a world without human and environmental degradation. Jeff, himself, suggested that it wasn’t pragmatic to hold that position with corporations, although it allowed him to draw a line in the sand when necessary. The great leadership contribution of this story lies
in Jeff’s explication of the larger role he played in helping NGOs and corporations (corporate outreach) understand and appreciate their differing agendas. It was this example that emphasized relationality, human agency, alterity and dialogue. Jeff returned to this role many times throughout the data and, while not offering it as an exemplar, it nonetheless reflected the relational practices of listening and negotiating on behalf of others, within a deeply complex context.

JESS

Jess’s influential leadership story was also one that demonstrated seeking outcomes that reflect the priorities of others. Early in her career, Jess believed that the best way to achieve social justice was rolling your sleeves up, getting dirty, picking up trash next to one another, because we are all one and the same. My leader’s influence on me was one that inspired me to think about changing systems rather than changing people’s demographics. She was the first person to help me understand, from a strategic perspective, how we can move a system forward rather than going out as an individual to volunteer for social justice causes. This leader believed in democracy but also believed in changing the view higher education held of their role in social justice causes; she wanted to change the view on campus. She had to tackle a lot of politics and she did that incredibly diplomatically. I came to understand the importance of acknowledging that sometimes we have particular privileges and that we should utilize those to the best of our ability. She came from an upper middle class background and had the privilege of having a postsecondary education where a lot of others don’t. It made her feel like she could do a lot more than what other people could do. That realization encouraged her to fight for social change within higher education and, for her, that meant more faculty involved in the community, engaging in a way that promotes good service rather than research. I really think she tried to teach me and talk to me about influential ways to create change from a systemic standpoint, rather than a personal standpoint. It was a foundational experience for me in that sense.
I asked Jess if she could talk a little bit about the practices she had observed in this leader. She had alluded to strategy but I wondered if she could be a bit more specific about this leader’s practices.

One of the things she had is vision. So leaders have a vision but, what does that really mean? Day in and day out, I couldn’t understand this at first and sometimes I still don’t. I’m not as strategic as some. So that being said, she had a vision for changing processes over a ten-year period. It was a specific vision with a goal that was very long term in nature ... I think a true leader shines through because they are able to speak with conviction about a specific vision that they have. Every committee she was a part of, every service that she was a part of, or every partner she worked with, had to be aligned with whether or not she could achieve this vision ... it was the alignment, the conviction, the way she would talk about things and I think also the confidence she had around being able to do that.

Jess seemed to be illustrating a kind of integrally congruent leadership that relationally moves people and processes forward, despite change and turbulence within the system. What is interesting is how this leader’s vision began to blind her to the present moment. Jess goes on to say, “Yes, in some ways to her downfall. She had clarity of vision but wasn’t able to change or adapt. I think what happened was that she got too narrow-minded, too much into ‘this is my vision and I will not let anything get in the way.’”

I asked Jess if she was conscious of trying to emulate the practices she was articulating about this leader.
That’s an interesting question ... the first job I ever had, I learned everything I didn’t want to be in a leader ... I didn’t like the team environment, I didn’t like the office dynamic, I didn’t like the culture and I didn’t like the way people treated each other. I didn’t like the leadership they exemplified but, instead of becoming jaded, there was something inside of me that said, look here is an experience that you’re having, you are not getting paid well by any means, but you’re here for a purpose and this can be a forming experience. I think every person in your life can influence you in some way or another ... at some point, I became aware that it was a formative time in my life and I needed to learn as much as I could from all of the people around me. I wanted to learn about what I like and what I didn’t like. This was a very intentional piece of why I went to work with my leader because I had become aware that regardless of the work I was doing, who I was working with was really important. I already knew her and wanted to learn from her and know her as a person and a leader. This was a critical part of understanding my own working base in my life.

Jess’s story clearly identified the practice of seeking outcomes that reflect the priorities of others while also underlining the dangers inherent in single-minded pursuit of an individual vision. Her story, like Jeff’s, encompassed fewer of the aspects highlighted by the others as relational but deepened our understanding of relational practice in lived experience. Pivotal to Jess was her leader’s vision for creating communities where service and relationships took priority over academic agendas. What Jess sought to emulate later in her academic career was the way that her leader built relationships between the community and the academy (relationality) while recognizing the importance of understanding social norms, histories and cultural contexts (contextuality).

Jess’s and Jeff’s stories underscored the varied ways that people express strongly held values or goods (Taylor 1989) and the way that narrative brings coherence and meaning to discordant lived experiences (Ricoeur 1984).
stories also emphasized the challenges that holding fast to a singular ideology can present.

The notion of leaders as “visionary” is a dominant cultural narrative and a prevalent theme in organizations. The term “vision” is somewhat murky, perhaps due to the difficulties inherent in melding vastly different perspectives among organizational members into an integrated whole. The concept of vision has been disparaged by some and, at its worst, conceived as narcissistic (Maccoby 2000). As in Jess’s story, it could simply be seen as an inability to consider changing contexts or other approaches or perspectives. It’s notable that, in many conversations about leaders and leaders’ practices, vision is seen as an essential attribute, often abstracted from lived experience and decontextualized. Views on leadership historically have been heavily influenced by trait, behaviour and contingency theories (see Chapter One). Leader development, as a result, has been dominated by the notion that certain leader traits, behaviours and processes can be identified, conceptualized and replicated. This has led to leaders believing that “followers” must enact their singular vision. As has been detailed in preceding chapters, leaders practise in complex, messy environments where the vision or path forward is rarely clear and where relationships between members is critical. Rather than a singular vision, the research participants seem to be suggesting a kind of leader practice that has an intersubjective complexity within it, a third realm of activity (Shotter 1993). In this realm, leader practice is responsive, relying on respecting, engaging and listening.
DORRIE

In contrast to some of the other stories of early influential leaders, Dorrie selected a relatively recent story to share.

One of the practices that I really had the privilege of observing in this woman was the piece that I would refer to as courage. She influenced me ... I don’t want to say taught me, but demonstrated to me the importance of courage in a leadership role. She expressed it through not only being there at your side when bad things happened or when things went wrong and, when I say being there, I don’t mean, “Come here, you need a big hug,” but rather, “This has happened ... let’s sit down and have a look at it.” She would set up a process and work it through with you. She was demonstrating that kind of clear thinking and courage to move forward. Also, she would demonstrate courage in the way that she would have a voice and speak up and advocate for the people whose care she was responsible for. And when I say the courage to advocate, sometimes her ideas and beliefs weren’t popular or mainstream at that particular time or not part of the organizational plan. Lo and behold, if she believed in it, she would give it her voice. Respectfully. So I used to watch that. It’s that tenaciousness, it wasn’t inappropriateness, it wasn’t sort of sidelining the meaning. It was like, “Here is what I would like to contribute,” and then she would very beautifully articulate whatever it was. She was always advocating, I mean she was always clear about what our roles were, who we were accountable to and responsible for aside from ourselves ... it was the residents, the people, their families.

Dorrie has had a long career in healthcare and I wondered if the respect, listening, courage and compassion that she was describing were unusual. “Yes. Yes, very unusual. It was a level, for me, of leadership that I had not experienced. Her clarity of vision, you know the mission piece and the ability to articulate the plan clearly was absolutely something that I had not experienced through my career.”
As mentioned in the preceding passages, the concept of "vision" seems to be a vitally important aspect of leading. I wanted to understand more about how this had influenced Dorrie in her practice.

It influenced me because I observed and watched and learned when I was a relative novice in a leadership role. Like, when I had a situation that just felt totally overwhelming, I always knew that she was just one phone call away and she would just help me walk through that, make sense of that and stand beside me and guide me. It wasn’t often that I needed that but I was thinking the other day about times when situations were highly charged, highly sensitive and involved other parts of the system. She had that system experience, that ability to sit down and work through it and make meaning of it. I often think of her now when I’m in that place and my phone rings … how do I be that calm strong presence that helps somebody else work through something that is going on?

I asked Dorrie if she brought these practices to mind before going into highly charged situations or whether she drew on those practices in the moment.

Are you asking me about the anticipatory piece? I think about her often. Absolutely. Even in times like now, in meetings, I think of her and I think, okay how would she have responded? How would she have looked on this? Would she have dealt with this now? So it’s just that voice of courage. She was also very skilled with the relationships. She had the ability to form very quick and affirming relationships with people during difficult moments or when she was delivering news that was not popular. She had self-courage.

I was both curious and a little unclear about what Dorrie had experienced as “anticipatory practice” and I wanted to hear what she had observed this leader doing that seemed both anticipatory and a reflection of leadership.
She, as part of her soundness and relationality, taught me about preparedness and always being prepared. She didn’t say that but I always went into meetings that she chaired or attended and I watched that degree of sophistication ... there was always an agenda and things that had to be attached and sent ahead in good time ... there was nothing on the agenda that she wasn’t prepared for. So, that to me, that role modeling of that level of preparedness ... that to me, is anticipatory. It shows that she has done the pre-thinking ... but also that piece around what needed to be looked after or moved forward.

At that point in the conversation, Dorrie and I discussed whether she consciously and intentionally allowed her own leadership style to be influenced by this leader.

Yes, I do. Very consciously, I do think about how I want to show up for others. But I want to be clear: it’s authentic, I don’t sort of stage craft my presence. To this day, I have colleagues who were mentored by her ... we laugh and reflect often about how we show the same sense of accountability and responsibility and we always say her name with an “ism” after. She empowered me and believed in me and gave me opportunities. She’s the one that came forward and asked me if I had heard of this Alzheimer’s care centre. I said absolutely and she said, “I want you to open it.” I remember saying to her, “Oh, my God, I can’t open it up. I’ve never opened a place before” ... and she said, “You’ll be fine.” So all the work around the core knowledge piece, the operational stuff around the financials, doing budgets, hiring and human resources and all of that stuff. That was the foundation that I learned from her ... from her I learned courage. Now, that’s what people give me feedback on or make comments about. They’ll say, “Oh, my God, your passion is so strong and you have such courage in the way that you take it forward.”

Dorrie’s narrative about what practices have been influential for her in leaders and leadership, reveals the inner structure of her thought, what Hermans et al. (1992) refer to as dialogical narration. They describe the self as a “dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous ‘I’ positions in an imaginal landscape” ... positions [that] function like “interacting characters in a story” (1992:28) while Richardson et al. propose that “the self or person centrally is a particular, embodied, interplay of voices and perspectives” (1998:512). Dorrie’s account exemplifies the
way that humans reflect on the remembered voices of others, drawing on their wisdom and experience, through a reflexive dialogue occurring within the self.

Inherently, humans seek to bring their experiences and actions in line with their strong evaluations, their overall sense of the good or decent life, which itself evolves with experience. This pursuit may bring fulfillment or a lasting sense of meaningfulness, but also seems to involve some of the pain and struggle that accompany the moral life ... they come to selfhood in the context of certain commitments and identifications, often question them (although not all at once) and one way or another continue the search. [Richardson et al. 1998:513]

I found what Dorrie referred to as the “anticipatory piece” quite fascinating. She seemed to be relating a way-of-being that includes imagining what others might need in order to be fully present and in dialogue. She was highlighting the notion that meetings are a space for both meaning making and meaningful action. Given that, a leader’s practice of preparing self and others for dialogue is significant. The critical processes of listening, respecting and sharing alternative views and standpoints become possible when information is freely and openly shared.

The manifold beauty of this story lies in its illumination of evolving identity as a leader. Throughout the telling, Dorrie expressed an enacted self-narrative always in conversation with other lives—past, present and imaginal. She demonstrated an exquisite fluidity in moving back and forth between "I" positions, learning and growing in the process. Her narrative lends credence to Ricoeur’s notion of our life as an “unending work of interpretation” (1992:179).

This constellation of stories (Jeff’s, Jess’s, Dorrie’s) concerning the attribution of vision was interesting to me, in that, while having vision seemed to be a property of the individual leader (entititative), the language describing the practices of being
visionary was grounded in the lived experience of the participants and was distinctly more processual.

Jeff: The vision was a bedrock ... or a do-not-pass-this-line ... It gave a foundation to not pass that.

Jess: So leaders have a vision but what does that really mean? Day in and day out I couldn’t understand this at first and sometimes I still don’t. I’m not as strategic as some. So that being said, she had a vision for changing processes over a ten-year period. It was a specific vision with a goal that was very long-term in nature ... it was the alignment, the conviction, the way she would talk about things and I think also the confidence she had around being able to do that.

Dorrie: Her clarity of vision, you know the mission piece and the ability to articulate the plan clearly was absolutely something that I had not experienced through my career.

What emerged from all of the stories was a perspective on leader practice that included the processes of articulating values and ideals about marginalized others (human rights, access to education, holistic care for those living with dementias) and also included speaking to others about these groups with deep conviction. It demonstrates the interwoven quality of seeing another as oneself (Ricoeur 1992) and making determinations through strong evaluations of the good (Taylor 1989). The stories reveal the internal dialogues of the participants and demonstrate the way that identity is partly constituted by values. To select and internalize particular experiences, principles and practices, as was demonstrated by each of the stories of leadership, is to define ourselves by a set of our own strong evaluations. “To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand” (Taylor 1989:27).
Otherness and Othering

The concepts of other, otherness and othering have been written about extensively across disciplines (philosophy, anthropology, sociology, psychology, human geography, feminist theory, communication theory, organizational studies). It is a phenomenon that emerges within human communities and is understood most frequently through focusing on problematic binaries (male–female, white–black, straight–gay, us–them). By contrast, social constructionism focuses on the processes of co-construction and understanding. These standpoints are inherently plural; if we believe that our reality is co-constructed, it necessarily opens us to the perspective of the other. The view of social reality as intersubjective takes as axiomatic that there is no “I” without “You” (Shotter 1989). Our social reality emerges dialogically in relationship with others, either face-to-face or in our heads. Dialogism is relationally responsive, thus involves other people, conversations and experiences (Shotter and Cunliffe 2002; Cunliffe 2004).

Staszak (2008) suggests that the concept of “othering” refers to the transformation of a perceived difference into otherness. This part of the Other, Otherness and Othering storyline centres on the participant’s own, often deeply personal, experiences of being othered and of othering. The vignettes recount incidences with leaders who did not hold concern and care for others foremost in their actions and decision making. The stories represent a way-of-being that is anathema, where different perspectives are received, not as opportunities for exploration and dialogue, but rather as a dismissal into otherness. What is striking in these stories, is the deep identity work that is taking place. Carroll and Levy suggest
that “it is a combination of reflexivity and contextual instability that propels social actors into experiences of active and even intense identity work” (2010:214). The participants describe adverse lived experiences that while painful, enabled profound personal and professional growth. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) further propose that this kind of identity work requires being present, intentional and mindful of one’s circumstances in order to construct “an intelligible formulation” (Shotter 1993:157) that lends concordance to discordance (Ricoeur 1984).

GARY

In Interview Two, Gary’s second story recounts both his personal experience and the experience of others being treated instrumentally.
This particular leader was kind of the inverse of what I was talking about before. When things were happening it was not transparent, it was manipulative at times, it was personal and preferential at times and just plain poorly executed. Even when the right decision was made, for example, when they just couldn’t keep that person and position any longer, it was poorly handled. This had a lot to do with my leaving the organization; in fact, it had the most to do with my leaving. In this example, the challenging practices were the strength of this leader. His ability to articulate the imperative, why things needed to change, how tough it was going to be and why we all had to go through with it and that’s true sometimes. While that was a strength in implementing the changes, he showed favouritism, spoke behind peoples’ backs, was rude at times and dismissed people in ways that were unprincipled and uncaring. A senior colleague with more than 20 years in the organization was fired and escorted out of her office over a 1-hour period ... more or less marched out in front of 50 fellow workers. This employee was later invited to a senior management luncheon to honour her work and refused to attend. She said she found that she would instead rather be acknowledged by her staff over the 20 years, especially after she was more or less told to fuck off by the new leader. At one point I may have actually talked to Penny about that. At another point, this same leader called me to change my position without having any discussion and I got so excited about the possibility of being terminated with pay that I made the mistake of saying that I wasn’t interested in the position but that I would be interested in the severance. So he got back to me the next day saying how happy he was with me in the position I was in and that he couldn’t imagine me leaving. This was a person who was quite charismatic and funny, someone who you would like to have a drink with and who probably rose to that type of leadership by being well-spoken and gregarious, handsome and kind of leadership-looking. It was bad.

I responded to this recounting by saying that, sadly, this was not an uncommon story and that it seemed to represent the modernist conception of the other as an instrument for goal achievement.

Yes. It’s also ... again if you think about the greater good, if you really care about the institutional good for the organization, in this case, it doesn’t take much thinking if you sort of destroy morale and lose good people, even trying to get the right outcome, you haven’t really helped as much as you could. So there is a human piece to how people are treated and feel dignity in their lives and feel a sense of acceptance even if they aren’t making the decision. But also, what works better? People who work well together and who want to be there or people who are afraid and can’t wait to leave?
Gary’s story is complex, messy and reflective of a style of leading where the ends—in this case cost reduction—justify the means. Gary recalls feeling manipulated, that the processes were personal and, at times, retributive. Sumantra Ghoshal elegantly explicates this propensity toward dehumanization by highlighting the deterministic philosophy deeply rooted in present-day leadership and management practice:

When managers, including CEOs, justify their actions by pleading powerlessness in the face of external forces, it is to the dehumanization of practice that they resort. When they claim that competition or capital markets are relentless in their demands, and that individual companies and managers have no scope for their choices, it is on the strength of the false premises of determinism that they free themselves from any sense of moral or ethical responsibility for their actions. [2005:79]

By contrast, Gary is describing a way-of-being with others that is characteristically relational. A way of being that is respectful to others and allows others to be dignified even under difficult and stressful circumstances. He is not only articulating a responsibility toward others but also advocating for dialogue, a talking with others rather than to. I was struck by Gary’s attitude of openness to a different way-of-being in organizations and his core belief that people who feel valued and secure will create organizations that are inherently livable.

LEX

The second story, selected by Lex in Interview Two, highlights the experience of being denigrated and othered for advancing a different perspective and yet exemplifies how learning occurs through thoughtful reflection.
I didn’t have many direct interactions with this person … maybe four or five. I reported directly to someone who looked after a number of remote programs that were funded by the school board. There are a number of examples that come to mind. I remember going to see him to ask about supports for one of the people who worked in the learning centre. There were three or four paid staff and a lot of volunteers. This is so distinct to me. It’s a definite counterpoint to my first story. So I was going in to ask for supports for this particular person and I got pushed to a point a little bit. I remember him standing up behind his desk and pointing a finger at me and yelling. It was just something that I had never experienced before. He was just in complete anger and yelling at me and pointing his finger and saying how this person was not going to get x, y and z. I can’t even remember what the details were. But he was completely at this extreme level of anger and it seemed to be okay within the context for him to do that. So in terms of empathy, understanding, being present or any of those kinds of things, it was very much not there. So it was this very great need to control and to make it clear where I fit within this particular hierarchy. He also suggested that his direction was in alignment with the person that I reported to directly. I knew, on some level, that my supervisor was not able to be effective at being able to relay our messages because of the fear of being put in a compromised position and of being threatened … the leadership was based on fear and intimidation where there was very little room for dialogue and certainly no sense of engagement that was in any way open.

I wondered if Lex remembers this particular scenario now when he feels angry with someone at work: “It’s kind of a drastic example but it embodies a lack of dialogue and the characteristic of needing to control. So if I embody that in myself and I’m feeling annoyed by someone I try to remember that I was yelled at by him a number of times.”

I asked Lex if he felt seen by this individual during this extremely angry interaction, in other words, did it feel personal to him.

That’s a good question. The anger was certainly directed at me to the extent that I was the person raising the issue. His position was that this was going to be the way it was going to be and that I had no right to challenge and so on. It was pretty out there. I like being who I am and so perhaps I didn’t take that on. I was angry by the response but I wasn’t intimidated. I also wasn’t able to move forward because of his position, so it was a bit of a mix. Probably a mix in him seeing me as not controllable.
Given the context of our dialogue I was curious to know if, as a leader, Lex had had an angry response to someone and had to think, even in the moment, how he wanted to handle it.

I think when I look at what has happened to me, I would say that I have been; I mean, there have been times when I have definitely been angry and, if I am or when I am, I try to pay really careful attention to what I’m saying. I also, in those moments, try to practice not reacting. If I am angry, again on reflection, I take on someone else’s stuff or I am triggered because, in me, there are things that I have not resolved or worked through. The classic is something that I am ashamed of, that once explored, I can say, oh that’s what was going on ... It’s just interesting that it’s the in-the-moment gestures or the in-the-moment emotions that have the most danger of me holding on to them. If I remember to, which I don’t always, I can observe them, rather than let them be me. Then, I find the situation easier to work with.

This intensely jarring interpersonal experience provided Lex with the rich opportunity to reflect on how he wants to be with others. Fundamental to this research study is surfacing and learning from foundational narratives, both positive and negative. In this time of positive organizational scholarship, the tendency can be to eschew the negative experience in favour of more appreciative texts (Adams et al. 2004). Both Gary and Lex demonstrate the capacity to learn and grow from essentially adverse experiences, strengthening their self-narrative through reflexive questioning. Cunliffe proposes that reflexive practice offers a way of surfacing these pressures by encouraging us to examine the assumption that decisions are justified solely on the basis of efficiency and profit, that there is one rational way of managing, that maintaining current management practice is paramount and that as professionals we know what is best for others. [2004:408]
DORRIE

Dorrie also shared a story about a leader who “wasn’t present for others.” In characteristic fashion, she began with:

I’m still in recovery … I’m teasing! I thought about this one a lot. Over the years, I have had a lot of invisible leaders. People that you knew were there but were never present. And then, a few years ago, along came into my life a person that played a significant role in residential care. It was probably the hardest three years for me to sustain the idea that I wanted to continue to work in organized healthcare. It was difficult to support the spirits of others during this time. The leadership was very I-centred. I am doing this because … I know this is what is best … it wasn’t a collaborative style. There was very little heeding the concerns of others. I never saw any consideration of others’ concerns that I felt were truly authentic. Sometimes, I would hear stories from meetings that this person had said what an honour it is to care and support elderly people, as well as little stories about an older person in care, it never felt genuine. It felt contrived or somewhat staged. Her style was, as I said, not collaborative, very dictatorial and, for a lot of people, confidence damaging. People were fearful of repercussions … fearful of losing their jobs … their positions.

I asked Dorrie if it was too strong to say that this leader had abused her power.

No. One of the things that I observed in this individual was that, if it wasn’t her success, it wasn’t important and it wasn’t held up. This related to everything. If something was innovative, or wonderful, or an achievement, then it had to belong to this particular individual. So, in terms of abuse of power, absolutely!

At this point in our dialogue, I asked Dorrie about her self-narrative. I wondered if she had ever said to herself, “I am absolutely not going to do that.”
Yes. This was a time when I had to call on my own internal resources to continue to thrive and survive. I use humour. It keeps me going; there’s nothing like a good laugh. What other things did I do to survive? I had to very consciously not let that person poison me or erode my spirit or confidence. It was a difficult period of time here because we were opening the second phase and there were many times when we had to meet with her. I remember there was an opportunity to bring in some innovative flooring that is being introduced in the States and I had to be very adept and think how can I make this an opportunity. I would find out through the ranks that, even though I thought I had a certain amount of money for opening the second phase, I would find out I didn’t. Your question about survival? I survived through my relationships with others. Out in the bush, I used to say thank goodness we are a long ways from head office. A little bit invisible. And my belief too, that I would sometimes share with others: I don’t spend a lot of time gossiping or picking out what’s wrong but I would say to some people that it’s all right, this too shall pass.

I speculated that, in the fullness of time, Dorrie’s prediction would have proven accurate but I was curious to understand the overall impact of the behaviours.

Yes. It came to pass. Her lack of collaboration, the wilfulness, the collective fear, it’s probably the worst example I could share but I know I’ve had other leaders that have taught me about the lack of presence, the lack of availability to staff and the people they serve. So I’ve learned a different style from what I thought of as deficiencies.

I observed to Dorrie that I was struck by how intentional her learning was and how she demonstrated that virulent, negative experiences can be fertile ground for learning and forming relational practices. In this story, Dorrie exemplifies how identity construction involves being “continuously engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising” identity (Alvesson and Willmott 2002:626). Her conscious refusal to be othered or to allow her spirit or confidence to be poisoned or eroded and her ability to encourage others, is illustrative of a rejection of the dominant narrative by holding fast to a more coherent self-narrative (Carroll and Levy 2010).
Jess described an experience in the academic setting with a director of community engagement that taught her the meaning of “politics.”

I had known of this woman and I had known of the politics surrounding her for a long time. I was aware of it as a student, both in business and the social sciences. I was also made aware of it as an athlete but I was probably most acutely aware of it as a student involved in community service. I was frustrated because I felt like I was walking on eggshells around her. I always thought that power trips existed more in the business world. I quickly learned that if you work for a social mission of some sort or a nonprofit or any kind of community engagement, the power trip still exists. She existed to shut people down and she shut me down in multiple instances. So it was a learning process. The leader I told you about in my first story was in a similar position but she was authentic with where she was and with what she was doing and her purpose and intention was greater than herself. This woman had a large budget and her impact was large because of her areas of responsibility but the overall buy-in that she had from others was negative. I think that was visible in the relationships that she formed … with this woman, although she held a position that you would think would be for others, she was much more about herself. It was always about whose name was on a paper or what was posted about her and if she was missed she didn’t want to do business with you.

I remarked to Jess that it was an interesting contrast between the two leaders and I wondered what the impact of the second leader’s behaviour was on those around her.

She had positional buy-in but not relational buy-in from others on the totem pole. People worked with her because they had to … they had no choice. That’s just never a place that I want to get to as a leader. Where I have political clout because I know the president and where people work with me because they have to. It just seems elementary and foolish, incredibly political and just not respectful in any way. Later, other people made me aware that they were cognizant of what was going on … this was after I left.

I wondered if there was anything about this leader that was motivational or inspiring to Jess.
I think her position was one of trust in that she had the opportunity to do a lot of good. I think on the surface others were inspired by that. Initially, I felt inspired by her; I thought she could do a lot of good in her position. I felt like I was part of a cool group that was engaging in the community and doing really good stuff. At first, I thought she was great until the Kool-Aid wore off and I saw her true colours. I truly believe that she is very strategic in the partnerships that she built but also she destroyed a lot of different services in the community … this leader used her huge power to exploit things and got rid of two deans in the process. They just seemed to have no political power in the face of the things that she said. It was a really disheartening situation and one that was all based on politics and falsified metrics.

Jess had stated early in the narrative that she would never behave in this way if she were in a similar leadership position. Given that declarative, I wondered at the end of our session if anything had struck her in the retelling of the story.

If I were to reflect on what we talked about today and the other pieces about how important awareness is to life understanding, I would say that certain things might not make sense in the present moment but eventually it will make sense. You know, the piece that life is so much bigger than what we think it is. It is really so much bigger than our petty little issues and circumstances. I feel like both these leaders helped me understand in different ways about life and about myself.

I told her that was beautiful, a lovely summary. Just a reminder that the things that challenge us, that make us feel othered, are also opportunities to learn even when they are painful.

Exactly.

Jeff, Nicole and Kerri did not answer the question in Interview Two with a complete narrative or story. Within narrative research, the whole story is critical in that it demonstrates how people retrofit life events into a whole and coherent self-narrative that has both congruency and meaning. Disembodied characteristics of leaders are less likely to provide deep and meaningful shifts in our self-narrative, because they are recounted and remembered out of the original context.
hermeneutic inquiry, the story serves to help raise to consciousness the individual’s strong evaluations and provides the opportunity for new insights to emerge through its recounting. “Such reflexivity is the critical gaze turned toward the self in the making of the story” (Koch 1998:1184).

JEFF

Jeff spoke about leaders who are exclusionary and personify the concept of othering through the process of creating in and out groups (Staszak 2008).

So, for example, there is an annual planning cycle where you are setting up your strategic plan for the following year and then for the following three years and then for the following ten years out. This particular leader essentially withdrew the participation of anyone who had anything to do with the environmental issues, with social issues and said, really, you are not part of the strategy here. All you do is keep the waters calm, so the rest of us adults can do the adult work. You guys just keep those environmental NGOs from my door, from interrupting my day and keep those communities from interrupting my day because I have important oil work to do. So our function was removed from the strategic planning process. So there is a very tangible marginalization of the work.

I had the opportunity, at this point in the interview, to ask Jeff how he made sense of this attitude and how it affected the work he was moving forward.

So, when that happens, my personal reaction to that is kind of multifaceted. Some of it makes you work hard because if only there was more tangible evidence of the value of this, then if you work harder it will get noticed or be more obvious. Then you think, well maybe I have to do a better job at the marketing of what I do. It’s not self-obvious, the benefits of this. That’s one reaction that I had. Another reaction I had was to disengage. Work less hard. You know the top of the house, the CEO doesn’t care what I am doing and really doesn’t value what I am doing. So I think, so what’s the point. So I will continue to do good work, I will continue to think about the stakeholders that I engage with and their needs, their legitimate needs and how to manage those but you lose a certain percentage of your passion that you brought to the work before.
I asked Jeff if he ever had a sense of his own ethical principles and values being challenged under this kind of leadership.

Not so much challenged, as I said before, as kind of marginalized ... so it wasn’t that I was asked to do something unethical but it was more marginalized. So that was what I was struggling with. So it wasn’t necessarily ethics, it was more I’m struggling to imagine a leader that has such a narrow field of vision.

Jeff’s description of the ways he tried to mitigate the marginalization by working harder and "selling" the benefit of the work and, ultimately, doing his best but having lost his passion, speaks to the process of counter-identifying. Beech explains identity work as “distinct and potentially conflicting” (2008:52) and happening within a context of “contradiction, disruption and confusion” (Alvesson and Willmott 2002:626). Amid this framework of ambiguity, a leader can identify with the managerial formulation of identity (Holmer-Nadesan 1996) or can negate the dominant narrative (Carroll and Levy 2010). Jeff chose to negate the new managerial formulations of identity but, without an alternative storyline, lost energy and optimism, feeling marginalized, othered and without voice.

The Other, Otherness and Othering storyline brought to the fore my research questions about how the self is constructed in relation to others and how a leader's self-narrative is articulated through their lived experiences with others, both positive and negative. It seems that othering or the experience of alterity is critical to social awareness. As recounted in these stories, a significant aspect of relational leadership is the absolute acknowledgement of otherness. Our cultural and historical (modern) tendency toward discursive abstractions and cognitions about our understandings of the world distance us and objectify others. Only through being-in-
the-world and acting in and on the world do we understand the other. The participants’ stories are embodied, their memories of events with others incarnate a kind of leader practice that harmonizes with everyday life. Instead of monological abstractions, the narratives vibrate with a dialogical authenticity and practical wisdom. It is this comingling with other in thought and action that is constitutive of self and that evinces strong evaluations and relationally responsible practices. Thus leaders who wish to effectively engage complexity must do so not by analyzing a system but by engaging with it through a process of social interaction that respects freedom and nurtures novelty. This process involves deep, localized engagement between individuals wherein identity is constantly being constructed and reconstructed. [McClellan 2010:41]

**Human’s Being (Interview Four)**

The previous narratives illustrate selves formed through their strong evaluations yet, fluid enough, in the moment of relating with others, to step into alternate dialogical perspectives of the world. In Interview Four I invited the participants to reflect on the nuances of being and doing as a catalyst for dialogue centring on their understandings of themselves as they actively engage in the world around them. I was most interested in their situatedness, rather than the more objectivist approach privileged in much of leadership theory.

Leadership seen as being-in-the-world, allows us to take into account each individual context. Leadership is seen, using this intersubjective view, as alive and uncertain – leaders are inter-personally engaged with the world. This implies leadership as a dynamic process rather than a linear relationship … Moreover, it implies that this dynamic process is self-creating, self-realizing: engagement with the world develops and explores the potential both of individuals and of the relationship/process itself. [Ashman and Lawler 2008:259]
To spark dialogue, I selected a quote from Shotter and Cunliffe’s 2002 treatise on leaders/managers as practical authors. The quote centres on the notion “that if we know who to be then what to do falls into place” (Cunliffe 2009:94). As with all other interviews, the quote was sent out via email prior to the session in order to allow time for thoughtful reflection. In the initial paragraph, I provided context for the quote.

In studying leadership over the past few years, I have come to see leadership as a process of thinking about our actions, while reflecting on our immediate situations and ourselves. The following quote seems to capture quite eloquently the centre of this kind of thinking about leadership …

The basic practical-moral problem in life is not what to do, but instead what kind of person to be. [Shotter and Cunliffe 2002:20]

In the storyline Human’s Being, I identify one primary meaning dimension, that is, thinking about how we think (self and critical reflexivity). The dimension speaks to the highly reflexive self-development that is articulated by the research participants as they grapple with the concept of being in a world that rewards doing.

**Thinking About How We Think**

Thinking about how we think or, reflexivity, is crucial to the study of leadership because it draws on postmodern and constructionist theories in order to highlight our assumptions and beliefs about how we think about and describe the world. It involves thinking very differently about the nature of reality, the nature of leadership and the processes of learning. Reflexivity, as a practice, encourages leaders to question truth claims and question accepted organizational norms and narratives to expose underlying assumptions, contradictions and possibilities. The participants drew out actively-lived observations that reflect multiple practical realities rather than
academic theories. The following narratives reflect the participants’ understandings of themselves as relational, contextual and situated. The dialogue was emergent and open and, within the setting of the interview, a working out of what is most meaningful.

Reflexivity and reflection are concepts often used interchangeably and within this study were used interchangeably by the research participants and the researcher. It is not uncommon in the realm of leadership education to hear the term reflection used and both self and critically reflexive practice referred to. Leaders are frequently called upon to reflect on and articulate their thoughts and experiences. Such an articulation requires much more than simply reflecting back a mirror image. Reflection in the process of learning is an integral part of the language of leadership and demonstrates a transcendence of technical rationality toward a more systematic process of observing and reflecting on patterns (Schön 1983). Deep reflection or reflexivity is concerned with understanding the complex environments within which a leader is expected to take action. Peter Vaill suggests that “human consciousness is naturally reflexive: it notices itself noticing itself. It thinks about itself” (1996:85). Reflexivity, in this sense, represents a “turning back,” a root meaning of the term. Douglas MacBeth extends this by proposing that reflexivity is the “turning back of an inquiry or a theory or a text onto its own formative possibilities” (2001:36). It is a concept that challenges and unsettles basic assumptions, discourses and practices when describing reality. Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009) give an in-depth perspective on reflexivity by suggesting that it is the interplay of multiple levels of interpretation. These levels are data-construction, searching for underlying meaning, critical
thinking (about self, others and institutions) and unsettling long-held cultural, historical and social assumptions. In the following narratives, the research participants most frequently referred to the process of reflection as a practice that raises self-awareness and leads to making meaning of lived experiences. They demonstrated the interrelated levels of reflexivity as they ponder what it means to be rather than do.

LEX

The more I think about the quote, it’s “be more and do less.” It’s about how we show up. Leadership is about me. How do I show up? How do I listen deeply? How do I create a space that rings true to me and allows for other perspectives and other ways of being and focuses on the present moment? I find that interesting. The second quote in Lao Tzu talks about the hierarchy of leaders but it ends with this nice quote ... “the sage goes about her work quietly so that people say ... amazing, we did it ourselves.” How do I feel most comfortable in the doing of leadership work? If I create a space for others, I shouldn’t be in the credit-taking space. How much positive feedback do I need and what place should I have? I’ve been thinking about that. I just did a presentation on healthy communities. I presented, there were great questions and I left. Later, I got a note saying, “great job today.” The board was really impressed. It was interesting for me to reflect on that and ask what does this mean to me? I felt like I was just the messenger. The credit goes to the people who were engaged in the process.

I observed to Lex that he seemed to be talking about a way-of-being that is very different from the dominant narrative we hold about what it means to be a leader. I wondered if there was a tension for him between his perspective on serving others and the heroic leadership that is often portrayed.
It’s interesting that you call them servant and heroic. I don’t know if those names apply. Yesterday, in the meeting room, the VP was there to present as well. We were just talking and I felt really incredibly calm. I recognized that the people in the room all had different leadership styles and, in each of their own ways, it was exactly the right style for the moment. And for the work they are trying to do. So how I show up is not a prototype for leadership. Perhaps the dominant narrative is top down, I will say this but I think that folks are much more multi-layered than those words suggest. I don’t want to put them in a box with those labels. We’re all going at it from different places. I don’t feel that tension.

I observed to him that he seemed to be saying that leadership is not in these binary terms, but rather in the process of creating something with other people. I asked if he found leadership in the process of engaging with others. “I guess it’s how you show up. It’s what you think about and how you show up in that space that determines how you act. I don’t think the process leads, it’s the showing up that leads. The process is a manifestation of how you show up.”

I wondered if he was making a distinction between leaders and leadership.

I think everyone has the opportunity for leadership. If your research is about leaders in organizations then that has a specific meaning but everybody plays a leadership role. I would say how that plays out, to a large part, is how people show up. You can see that on the school ground. Maybe even very early on some people come from a reflective place.

I wanted to be clear on whether I understood what he was articulating so I asked if he was reluctant to put leaders and leadership into categories. He seemed to be saying that leadership was unique to the leader because it is most closely seen in how they choose to show up. I was curious about how he interpreted the quote’s suggestion that the basic practical–moral problem in life is not what to do but who to be.
I don’t think it’s a problem. I think that we’re faced with reality and what we witness and, if we really look at what is happening right now … how we show up is pivotal. I don’t see life as having a practical–moral problem. It’s a far more joyous and sacred process. Rather than looking at it as a problem … life isn’t a problem. It just is. It’s about how we lead and how we show up based on that. I don’t buy the practical–moral problem bit. How can life be a problem? I saw this video clip on Facebook. It shows the changing European borders since the 1200s. It was in reaction to Russia taking over Crimea. There’s no moral problem … it just is. As humans we’re on this earth and we do the best we can with the information that we have in the moment. If we learn more, we may do something different. Part of it is to honour that and not view life as having a moral problem. It’s more like, how do I make these decisions and be able to observe them and say … isn’t that interesting. I can stand back and look at decisions that I made and say, I really screwed up there. But I did the best I could do at the time. When I started teaching school the strap was still enforced. I still remember getting the strap myself. I had no idea why. My English wasn’t that great and so my Mom went to the school to try to figure it out but I never really knew why. When I started teaching school, I used the strap on a kid once. So now I explore it and say, now that I’m in a leadership position, how do I avoid violent acts? But in that space, that was the best I could do. It just becomes clear that I will not use violence.

I asked if that was something that we grow into.

That’s the joy of living that we can reflect and learn. Finding out what it actually means to be a part of the world. You can spend a lot of time thinking I screwed up or you can realize that you didn’t have the resources to be different in that situation. The interesting part, for me, is to figure out what I might do differently next time.

This passage was fascinating to me because it held such tremendous promise for forgiveness. A theme overall in our conversations was the notion that we are beings-in-the-world and, as such, we are always acting in and on the world (Heidegger 1962). Lex highlighted the deconstructive and reconstructive processes of recall and memory when suggesting that, as we reflect on our lived experiences, the process of forgiveness is crucial. Lex consistently proposed that we all do the best we can in the moment with what we know at the time. As we look back we may find some of our actions regrettable but forgiving ourselves allows us to forgive
others for that same condition of humanness. In the foregoing narrative, I understood Lex to be saying that reflection is a critical component to reach this understanding.

Yes, I think it’s about consciously thinking about whatever is on the table. The other part is being still. I don’t meditate but I do get up earlier than anybody other than the dog. I make a cup of coffee and I think I’m off to a great start if I can sit for a half hour and just think about the day. Just being quiet for a while before anyone else is up.

I wondered what the effects of that practice were on Lex.

I feel more centred when I do it. I feel more open. My eyes are brighter than if I haven’t done that. If I jump out the door and just go I’m already creating stories about what the day will be like. It helps me stay present. That’s probably why I’m drawn to it.

At this point in our dialogue, I asked Lex to reflect on our previous conversation about influential leaders. In his story, he had highlighted the practices of openness and a willingness to listen deeply. I asked if he had an aspiration to embody that as a leader.

I think so. It’s interesting if I look at myself and think there’s definitely a shift into being. I’m not all there, really, but there is a shift. I’m not sure it’s an aspiration. I don’t feel like I’m striving for something. It’s almost more looking at blessings. I’m so blessed in so many ways that I really don’t even have to think about money etc. It’s more a growing awareness of that and deciding what I do with that. If I’m so blessed, then what part of that blessing do I present in terms of how I show up. It’s really rich and I’m aware that it could go at any time and that also would be fine. I’m not always in a blissful state. Sometimes I’m struggling to focus on what’s going on and not feeling in a blessed state.

Lex’s narrative symbolizes reflection on his lived experiences and insightful self and critical reflexivity. His account exemplifies how we are shaped by our social interactions and demonstrates engagement in a dialogue with self about his
assumptions, traditions and taken-for-granted ways of being and seeing others. Lex was an active participant in thinking about how he thinks, as well as critically examining social and ideological influences. He moved reflexively back and forth between meaning fields, his own and others, as he thought through his perspective on leadership styles. “I recognized that the people in the room all had different leadership styles and, in each of their own ways, it was exactly the right style for the moment. And for the work they are trying to do.” In the foregoing passage, he was reflecting on the situated nature of leadership, recognizing that labels such as heroic and servant are static, while leader practice is dynamic and deeply contextual. Later, in the text, Lex demonstrated a fluid movement from self-reflexivity to critical reflexivity, represented by his memory of getting the strap, using the strap and shifting toward a way-of-being that strongly evaluates violence as abhorrent. His narrative exhibited a profound examination of assumptions, values and taken-for-granted ways of being while simultaneously challenging policies, procedures, processes and claims to truth. Lex was continuously in the dynamic process of deconstructing and reconstructing his “forgotten choices” and “epistemological limits” (Lynch 2000:36). His thinking was inherently dialogical and heteroglossic, embodying many voices and diverging viewpoints, while simultaneously understanding that meaning is fluid and never final: “Isn’t that interesting. I can stand back and look at decisions that I made and say, I really screwed up there. But I did the best I could do at the time ... the interesting part, for me, is to figure out what I might do differently next time.”

Lex’s dialogue with self personifies a relational way-of-being, open to the present moment and to the new possibilities within it.
“It’s been really nice to talk like this. I don’t get much of a chance to think about why I do what I do ... these sessions are touch bases for thinking about why I do what I do.”

I mentioned to Nicole that the Shotter and Cunliffe quote held meaning for me because it spoke to the value of reflection.

Yeah ... that’s a great quote. When I think of my younger self ... if I was faced with someone who had a very different view, it was an opportunity to debate. Now, I try to understand where they are coming from. It doesn’t ruffle my feathers, I don’t let it bother me, I am much more centred or balanced; when it comes to my opinion on things, I am much less quick to convince others of my point of view. If there’s an opportunity to explain my position without confrontation, then I do. I used to get stressed thinking I had to change everyone’s position. It’s like the republican and democratic debate. It becomes vitriolic. I realized that, to change things, required just taking it one step at a time and to seek to understand, rather than to be understood. In the process you always learn more about yourself. It’s positive both ways ... realizing that there is power in not being forceful with things. As I said, seek first to understand. Yeah ... it’s just being and not worrying about what others’ opinions are. It’s knowing who you are and the path that you have chosen.

I was interested in Nicole’s perspective on being and openness. She seemed to have moved to a place where she can just be and, in that being, is open to the other.

Yeah ... I do feel like I’ve come to a different place and I feel like it’s the right way to go. In the past, I might have felt the pressure to be more forceful and direct with my opinions. Now, I will listen before stating a position on something.

In this passage, Nicole was reflecting on a deeply-entrenched way-of-being. She demonstrated how self-reflexivity has enabled her to see patterns in her behaviour that may be relationally limiting. “It gets tiring to fight all the time and it’s not the most effective way to achieve what you want to achieve. Sometimes, when you argue,
you take away the negative tension. If you just listen it is more productive. My Mom is much more opinionated than me and I just don’t argue anymore.”

I mentioned to Nicole that she seemed to be talking about a shift in her way-of-being and I wondered how her Mom responded to that.

She doesn’t get anything back to work with, so it’s a nonissue. For me, it’s personal growth. Everything falls into place after you’ve spent the time being introspective. When someone has a different opinion, it’s good to hear their objectives. In sales, they say, if you don’t have an objection, you don’t have a sale. An objection helps you to make a better case for what you’re trying to put across.

Nicole went on to critically examine her underlying assumptions in light of broader cultural narratives and observes both the limitations and the possibilities for greater awareness and understanding. She seemed to have an intuitive understanding of the need for praxis rooted in ethical action.

Probably … when I had a negative view of First Nation people. I had the typical Canadian view of them milking the system, taking advantage and kind of pathetic. I wasn’t totally pigheaded about it but I was more in that way of thinking. I ended up getting to know some First Nation folks through my job and came to realize that I had been totally wrong. That realization came from listening and being open-minded. When I was a financial planner, it was my job to hear from people and learn about their goals. This was a real eyeopener for me … understanding someone else’s position before judging them.

In this part of the conversation, I suggested that the shift in her narrative, about First Nations people, has created an opening for new information to come in and for complacent or ritualistic thoughts and actions to be challenged.

Yeah, I think some people think if you change your opinion, you’re weak. It amazes me that some people would rather die on their sword than change their opinion. It must have something to do with insecurity and a desire to not appear weak. Some people will stick with their belief, even when the facts are there in front of them. I think it has to do with feeling like I’ll lose control if I don’t stick to my convictions.
I noted that we all cherish control to a degree and asked for her understanding of what Shotter and Cunliffe refer to as the basic practical–moral problem in life. Together we mused about what that might mean.

That’s hard for me to answer. I have no idea where they are going with that. Maybe they are referring to compassion. You hold yourself out as a compassionate person but, when others aren’t looking, are you really compassionate? What are you doing when no one is looking? I ask myself who is looking all the time. I hate single-use plastic ... if I go for a walk and I see plastic I have to ask myself what am I going to do ... walk by or pick it up? That’s a big question ... it’s easy to do whatever when no one’s looking but are you really being who you want to be? Yeah ... I think when you are around others you need to think about who you are.

Nicole was reflectively and reflexively questioning the underlying meaning in what she was seeing around her. She was thoughtful and critical of herself, as is evidenced by her story about shifting her way of being from certainty to uncertainty and from the offensive (arguing her point) to being attentive and introspective. Her articulation of how she changed her perceptions of First Nations groups by challenging her long-held assumptions and biases, signalled a willingness to assess and challenge dominant cultural narratives. She appeared to be experiencing some unsettling as she took the time, in the interview, to challenge her relied-upon ways of making sense. This was supported by her in-the-moment contemplation of the quote and making meaning of it within her own lived experience. She seemed to stand outside of herself, as she pondered the idea of being. “I ask myself who is looking all the time [...] That’s a big question [...] it’s easy to do whatever when no one’s looking but are you really being who you want to be?” This question is both highly existential and self-reflexive and demonstrates being “struck” (Cunliffe 2002, 2004). These are learning moments that change our very form of understanding, wherein we
spontaneously respond to something occurring within or around us. Nicole seemed
to be asking not only, who am I? (when no one is looking) but also, do I act with
character and consistency? As she thought about who she is, she demonstrated a
practical form of creating theory from practice, rather than from disembodied
conceptions, characteristics and abstractions of leadership.

KERRI

The quote you sent out really encompasses what I think of when I think about
leadership. To me, leadership is about understanding the influence we have on
people. It’s the example we set. I have a quote by Albert Einstein. It says that setting
an example is not the main means of influencing people, it’s the only means. We
can’t make people do things. It doesn’t work and it’s destructive. Real leadership is
about setting an example and knowing that people are watching that. Only some of
us consciously identify as a leader but we’re all leaders. We’re all setting an example
all the time. We’re all in the world and people are always watching us.

I asked Kerri if she was saying that leadership is about who you are being and,
therefore, needs a kind of congruency between what we say and do. Kerri
responded, “There doesn’t need to be a congruency, unless people want to be influenced
by you.” I wondered how she came to that level of awareness of self and leader
practice. I suggested that there are deeply-entrenched beliefs about leadership that
come to us through our history, situation and culture. These are prevalent beliefs
and holding an opposing view can be challenging. We often move through life
holding the tension of these polarities. I wondered how she came to reject the more
traditional notion of leadership for something more relational.
I’d say I focused a lot of energy in my early 20s on constructing my own identity about what I felt and believed ... I didn’t have a notion of leadership in there. In some ways, I was rejecting the notion that the older men who held power should influence me. I rejected that and so I spent time figuring out what I felt. In my 30s, I took on leadership with the La Leche group and I took on a leadership position and other community organizing. I just felt that this was comfortable and, in my job, I was asked to do more training and was asked to teach others what I knew. My identity grew as a leader; I could see that people were watching and it felt great. It was sort of organic and it definitely diverged from that more traditional view and rejected the idea that someone else could tell me what was the right thing for me.

This passage highlights Kerri’s rejection of a paternalistic and hierarchical narrative of how women should think of themselves and be in relation to men. Instead, she spent time in reflection, “figuring out what I felt.” It seemed she also felt comfortable in a community of women and began to organically build her leadership practice. I wondered if she recalled feeling the tension between these divergent worldviews. “With parenting for sure. Sometimes you think you know best and you’re in charge but that really contrasts with the idea that the only way to lead people is through example. If I’m going to influence people I can’t come down on them like an authoritarian.”

I shared with Kerri that I loved her example, because I think that so many of our foibles are apparent in parenting, in particular, the deeply-held belief that we need to have the answer. Or, as Kerri noted, “the one who leads the way, with all the right answers.” Together we explored the ways that, culturally, we want to look to others for the right answer to our pressing social issues but when they don’t have what we perceive to be the right answer, we vilify them. “Yeah ... for sure. We want authority but we fight against it. We want someone to take care of us but when it fails we launch attacks.”
I mentioned to Kerri that I had really shifted in my thinking about leadership and that I now view it as a series of processes … more like the emergent property of a group, rather than something an individual does. I wondered what she thought.

I spent time, in my 20s, thinking about who I want to be and that’s the good focus. Ultimately it’s what we do have control and influence over. In a fear-based, militaristic way, we can have control but it usually backfires. But we do have control over ourselves and ultimately it’s our only sphere of influence. Sometimes I think we just need to peel back the layers of the crap that’s on top of us to get to who we really are and it makes me think of the group question on learning to connect with the other. That’s what I’m learning now. It’s a bigger project and its part of my identity development in recent years. The idea about connecting with the other and that it may be part of my identity that’s forming now or maybe I’m just now acknowledging that.

Kerri and I both have a master’s degree in Leadership (MALT) from Royal Roads University. This gave us a collective experience and a language that was, for both of us, deeply familiar. I thought there might be a danger to overlay my own academic experience onto Kerri, so I specifically asked how her academic foundation in leadership had transformed her practice.

I really liked having the academic, historical and longer view of leadership. Having that foundation was helpful in putting my own personal views into a larger understanding of what it meant. It gave me the bigger picture and a theoretical foundation. It gave me words, lingo, verbiage. It gave me a lot of language to express myself and to define relational leadership. Things like how to collaborate and knowing that you’re setting an example, soliciting the ideas of a group, organizational and facilitation skills and the theory around those things. I can’t think of anything else.

I wondered how the theory, for her, influenced the being aspect of leading.

Right … really embodying it. I did feel different. I learned so much in my program but, as I look back, I see that it really all happened after. During the two years of MALT, all these ideas were floating around in my head but they didn’t get grounded until I took them back to the workplace and my practice.
I asked Kerri her perspective on how the quote about being and doing actually works in the crucible or pressure cooker of life.

My thoughts are that self-discovery and what’s important to me don’t get answered and then checked off; it’s a lifelong process. I used to think that marriage was something that you did and then moved on but it’s about ongoing daily practice. I think that’s a given. It seems really evident to me that our messy problems are from the doing and not the being. We are humans doing and not humans being. I don’t know why we don’t want to do this. To me it seems really basic.

One of the most delightful aspects of working with Kerri was her articulation of what seemed basic to her. She embodied the simplicity that comes from thinking deeply about the complex.

I guess it’s complex. It can be ascribed to the difficulty in getting our basic needs met. Sometimes just to get food on the table ... but, for a lot of us, it’s still about not being able to meet our basic needs. All of us seem to struggle with those things. Kind of like Maslow ... until you have your basic stuff met, how can you work on higher things? Sometimes we’re concerned with what will happen at home tonight. Those things can be on my mind. My boyfriend is a little unhappy with me right now. I’m thinking about my son. I definitely haven’t had enough sleep. Those are the things that are going on for all of us, all the time. I think it’s about creating the space. Putting a time regularly in my day-timer to journal. Thinking about what is happening for me at work. Spending time in meditation or in nature. Many of my best thinking times are in the bath. Creating the space for reflection is super valuable and a big practice.

In this next passage, I asked Kerri if she reflected on upcoming events and thought about who she wanted to be ... an imaginal dress rehearsal.

I would say I do that and I keep coming up with the same answer. I want to be authentically myself, open, relaxed and attentive. It’s what I want every time. Maybe it’s more of a process of reminding myself of that. What did I do when it went well? I remind myself of that.
Kerri seemed to be moving back and forth between the levels of reflexivity. You can see this interplay in her thinking as she moved from articulating her own formation of identity as a leader, to examining and rejecting masculine power structures. Her account demonstrated a predisposition to reflection both in the present and in deconstructing and reconstructing memories that refresh and enliven her ongoing self-development. Her education clearly helped her to anchor theory in practice and she demonstrated the capacity to radicalize (Pollner 1991) her perspectives by reflecting on self, others and the constitution of meaning. This was wonderfully expressed when she suggested that we are humans doing, rather than humans being and that this predisposition is problematic for our institutions (marriage) and the nexus of our messy social problems.

Kerri appeared to recognize that leadership theory can be an abstracted set of essential skills (collaboration, idea generation, facilitation), until they become “grounded” in day-to-day practice. She concisely articulated an ontological notion of being, as a conscious becoming. “My thoughts are that self-discovery and what’s important to me, don’t get answered and then checked off; it’s a lifelong process.” Kerri’s reflexive movement back and forth between meaning systems deepened her self-understanding and was opening her to increasingly relational forms of being. Values that played through Kerri’s interview were the desire to connect with others and to be open, relaxed and attentive to others. These practices reflect a relational ontology, a dialogical openness to others and a reflexive relationship with the world.
The first thought I had on the quote was on something that came to me a few years ago. It’s the desire to fix and do and to complete and I think that’s a bit of a nursing culture. You want to move in and do something ... to make it work and be right. The quote says what kind of a person to be ... it rang for me around my development as a leader. My maturing as a leader, being able to step back and look at the situation, sometimes giving myself the permission to lean in and wait. Not to rush in, to allow myself the sense-making time. For me, now, I look at it and think about all the people who may be involved. I sit down and through dialogue I try to stay open and stay present and think through who I want to be. I want to be a leader who listens and facilitates and has conversations that result in meaning. I have much greater rewards for myself as a human being and much greater rewards for the outcomes. I believe that the people who work with us are so in tune and watching us that, what I say as a leader, has to match what I’m doing, a congruency of actions and words. In the past when I have just acted it’s not been great. I have to shortcut ... it’s all the risk management stuff.

In this passage, Dorrie was echoing Kerri’s sentiments about the importance of congruency and modelling a way-of-being as a leader. I wondered how Dorrie had reached this evolved understanding and what kind of tension she experienced given her commitment to being.

How did I learn that? I learned it through observing people I admired, I tried things, I’m naturally a relational leader, pondering my personal reflections on how I would like to be led. That leads me to the tension ... one of the hardest things in bureaucracies is wishing that I could be treated that way at times. I often reflect on how little I receive that and it’s a very real tension. Watching people I report to and wishing to be led by the style of stepping back and just being with people. There are lots of doers. We have looked after, done this and that and all the boxes are ticked off and lined up ... I have reflected on this a lot. I have the privilege of having a great sense of intuition and I think that watching and learning from others shaped the acting and doing. It seems like what’s rewarded is measured. How quickly have you acted or responded ... what’s left on the table. That is operant conditioning at its best.
I mentioned studies that indicate leaders who take the time and think through and collaborate with others have better outcomes.

Yeah ... it’s really a culture and the nature of this work. Certainly, you have to move quickly many times. You have to judge the level of risk but mainly, with people, you have the time to reflect. I’ve learned to resist the idea of getting it off my plate and having it looked after. I had an issue the other day and I thought no ... it’s Friday afternoon and I knew if I gave it some soak time over the weekend I’d have better solutions and outcomes. It turns out that, if I had had the conversation on Friday, the outcome wouldn’t have been that great. That’s the tension.

I suggested to Dorrie that the wisdom to know something needs a little more soak time and actually enacting that can be very challenging in a system that rewards the doing of things rather than thoughtful reflection on things.

I think the other piece is about working in complex systems and I don’t know how I’ve survived. Organizations have complexity and the opportunity to be creative in them is small. If you stay, you have to weigh the things you have control over or the things that can wait ... and then shuffle that off and see what you can do without the organization. I’ve learned working within the complex structures of healthcare to weigh thoughtfully and to have a look at what I can be successful at taking forward and be supported. And then I have to weigh the work that needs to go on without the organization structure. It’s the breaking it off ... ummm ... begging forgiveness rather than seeking permission. The program development work, the things you know would benefit where you are, if you can promote it. The answer might be, not just yet or hold off, we’ll need to take that to a higher level. That’s the kind of thing, as you become more seasoned, you learn, what the important things are and what you just leave alone and work on quietly.

I asked if that meant just below the radar. “Yes,” she said, “if you do, it becomes way too complex and time delayed and distorted in the organization structure.”

I observed that the structures that we operate within are often fairly simple and the work is quite complex. So, to try to move something complex forward in that simple system often doesn’t work. The complexity gets lost. “Yeah, sometimes I think
I’m there and then, we’re undergoing another huge organization change and, rather than getting twisted and upset, you just weigh what you have control over and what you don’t.”

I was struck by the fact that Dorrie never said she let go of people or important projects or processes, but rather that she was waiting for the right time (kairos versus chronos). “Waiting for the right partnerships, for the right initiative, for the right piece that needs to move forward. It’s a matching game. I don’t cheapen it by using the word game ... you have to know where the strengths lie and who can help you to move something forward.”

Dorrie seemed to be saying that she placed a protective boundary around what she perceived as important within the system. I wondered if that was a conscious role that she played. I elaborated by suggesting that she is leading the way for a very vulnerable population and there are things about dignity and respect and quality of life that she holds paramount. I said I had a vision of her standing between this very marginalized population and the structures that threaten them.

Yeah ... I do. Sometimes, just intuitively, I know that this too shall come to pass, that this doesn’t make sense. So it’s how you interpret, apply, question and advocate. I think what I try to do the most is bring people on side with social justice and my passion and spirit for this work. That’s where my influence is great. Sitting down with people and co-creating vision. My example this Friday, was that I asked our plant services to replace a burnt piece of counter. I didn’t check and when I finally went down they had cut out a huge chunk and just glued some laminate on it. That touched such a chord in me of disrespect. I thought, “Oh, my God!” This is people’s home and I wouldn’t do that in my home and yet that’s good enough in the institutional structure. It hit me right in the gut. I had to say, “This isn’t good enough.” He said, “I know how keeping that place nice means a lot to you. I don’t know but somebody didn’t follow my orders.” That’s an example of the bureaucracy of those structures and how you feel wounded.
I recalled that when I met Dorrie, the organization had just gone through a massive redesign, which she described as the larger system burping. Her role, as she articulated it, was to scramble to maintain the culture and the principles in the face of all of these moving pieces. I wondered if she was naming a practice of leaders. Dorrie elaborated, saying:

It’s also the interpretive piece. I may have heard about someone’s new idea or policy and then it’s how I come back and how much I share and how I am with the team. It’s almost kind of like screaming. It is a boundary. I am careful about what I bring back because I know a large percentage will go away before it happens. It can be hard for the team to understand the complexities and you want them to be protected. It’s a nicer place to be when you’re not getting that anticipatory stuff laid out.

I asked if that was another kind of boundary. “Yes ... it’s like screaming and holding the boundary.” Screaming and holding the boundary. Dorrie was enacting the socially-constructed process of making meaning throughout the interview, while articulating this meaning in highly metaphoric and poetic language. She embodied practical authorship, articulated by Shotter:

good managers, when faced with ... unchosen conditions, can, by producing an appropriate formulation of them, create (a) a landscape of enabling constraints relevant for a range of next possible actions; (b) a network of ‘moral positions’ or ‘commitments’ (understood in terms of the rights and duties of the ‘players’ on that landscape); and, (c) are able to argue persuasively and authoritatively for this ‘landscape’ amongst those who must work within it. [1993:149]

Dorrie’s landscape was characterized by rapid discontinuous change. Her reflexive dialogue underscored a number of leader practices—knowing that the current situation will pass, having patience and persistence, not rushing to do but
assessing and holding the boundaries around people, projects and processes. I wondered how she encouraged her team to engage in self-reflection and being.

There’s respect, there’s credibility. They know I’m steadfast. That’s the piece about how my actions match my meaning. I think that gets tremendous credibility. From the relationship and the trust they understand the fairness. They know they have a voice, there’s fairness, that’s a big piece. They can come forward and sit down and say that perhaps they have felt mistreated and we sit and talk about it. When I look at the teams, I encourage it by example, because I love what I do and I’m willing to be engaged in what they do. In helping them out and encouraging them. This work is about following a path. You go through difficult times with teams or residents or their families. It’s amazing, if I think, “Oh, my God, we need to fix this, we are at risk,” when I go down to the cottages, is when I receive back exactly how I’ve been leading. When you falter or slip up or feel impatient or pressured and you get hauled up short, they’ll say no … we’ve learned or here’s our ideas on how we’d like to do this. That’s when you know that your team and the people that work here are walking the path and know the path.

Dorrie’s narrative reflected her long career within the institution of healthcare. Much of what Dorrie spoke of when she talked about leader practice and leadership is the wisdom of many years of learning how to be herself within a system that values doing and not being. Dorrie’s story was respectfully subversive. She demonstrated an ability to push hard on assumptions about the ways to be and do institutionally that neglect and marginalize populations (patients, families, staff). “So it’s how you interpret, apply, question and advocate. I think what I try to do the most is bring people onside with social justice and my passion and spirit for this work. That’s where my influence is great.” In the preceding passage, Dorrie was not just “screaming and holding the boundary” but was respectfully subverting the dominant organizational narrative about power and institutional change toward relationality and social change. She was neither distracted nor co-opted by the larger organizational
narrative but, instead, was listening to a multiplicity of voices (polyphony). Critical reflexivity stimulates polyphony and encourages multiplicity and “this is turn gives the marginalized quieter voices a greater chance of being heard” (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009:284). Her respectful subversion took the form of listening, thinking before acting, considering what can be moved forward organizationally and what needs to take place outside of the system. “Weighing the work that needs to go on without the organizational structure” spoke to Dorrie’s identity (being) as a leader within elder care. She challenged organizational mandates and logic while legitimating local power and agency. Dorrie affected this shift without stepping into a we–they polarity so common among agents of social change. At no time in Dorrie’s narrative was there a divide and conquer storyline; instead, she employed a kind of respectful subversion by de-legitimating institutional concerns in favour of legitimating local relational concerns. This illustrated Heidegger’s (1962) hermeneutic conception of humans as moral beings acting in and on the world. Dorrie appeared to be holding the tension between authenticity and wholeness, all the while recognizing the inauthenticity and meaninglessness of being-in-the-world. Alvesson and Skoldberg suggest that it is this anxiety that “makes it possible to make non-trivial decisions, thus taking responsibility for and retrieving ourselves as individuals” (2009:118).

GARY

Gary opened the conversation by sharing his reflections on the quote and on the cultural, contextual and situated aspects of leadership. In this conversation, he
highlighted the intersubjectivity and the intertwined complexity of post-heroic leading (Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011).

When I reflected on the quote, I was thinking that leadership is very situational and context-oriented. It’s not only less true to look at it as proper decision making but it’s also not the way it often works. I think there are fewer and fewer hero leaders. In fact, there are fewer individuals who make things occur even if they have great influence. My decision about who I’m going to be is contextual. It may be more important to be self-aware, so that things like compromise and conflict aren’t just incidental, but rather that there is a reflectiveness about how I lead.

In this part of the text, Gary seemed to be saying that not only are there fewer leaders who could be considered heroic, but also there are fewer leaders (heroic or otherwise) who can actually effect change in an increasingly complex world. His focus on the context and situation in which leaders are trying to effect change highlighted the complexity of the world and the infinite contingencies that affect our decisions. Thus, “even if individual leaders do make a difference, that difference is only marginal in comparison to the influence of more structural features like the economy or religion or political party or social class or gender or any other of the myriad variables on offer” (Grint 2005:1470).

Gary went on to elucidate the importance of critical self-reflection to the being of leadership. “I think my earnestness might keep me awake at night and would make me reflect. It was stressful but I knew it was important to think about where I was coming from. I think I have learned more over time and I am sometimes cynical. I have seen examples where acting in a moral way seems pretty far away.”

The foregoing revealed Gary’s long practice of thinking about his own thinking. His description of self-reflection as stressful, at times keeping him awake at night,
implied an inner dialogue of holding self to account. As I considered this, I was reminded of Dunne’s (1995) belief that a life unaccounted for can hardly be considered a life and that meaningful learning and reflexivity are not “cognitive processes occurring in the head,” (Fletcher and Watson 2007) “but rather are ongoing (re)constructions emergent in and through multiple interwoven conversations” (Corlett 2012:454). Moments that keep us awake at night are often “striking moments” (Cunliffe 2002:42) and “sticky moments” (Riach 2009:356) where we are arrested by “something important that we cannot quite grasp in the moment” (Cunliffe 2002:42). I understood Gary’s wakeful reflexivity as engendering new ways of talking, feeling and thinking about his lived experiences. I was curious to know if, “seeing examples where acting in a moral way seemed pretty far away,” was disconcerting in the social justice arena.

I think I got away from that a while ago. I think you know that I studied religion. The Bhagavad Gita or the Blue Lord of the Universe and Arjuna, his friend, have a conversation on the edge of the battlefield. It comes down to Krishna telling him he needs to keep his focus on truth and that he has to go out and do his duty and fight. Both things ... you have to do. That made me realize that you have to remember what’s true AND fight. Part of working in the world is not getting despondent by the compromises or by your own failures and finding hope.

In this passage, Gary was underscoring the connection between understanding being and spirituality (Being). He demonstrated a fluidity in his thinking that could be considered part–whole thinking and is reflective of seeing both the forest and the trees. Gary’s spirituality is also his epistemology and represents a way of coming to know the world through engaging with and reflecting on spiritual narratives. He has been a lifelong student of the spiritual, learning and teaching the practice of
meditation and he draws on wisdom from many traditions. In this passage, he proposed that there is a great need both to be and to do and he demonstrated a reflexive drawing on larger narratives to make meaning of present circumstances and to guide action. At this point, I inquired if he thought that the quote was suggesting both being and doing. “Kind of ... I thought it meant not what you’re doing now but what are you holding while you’re doing it.” I wondered if, in his experience, the language that we use to describe leader practice was in terms of being or doing.

I don’t know ... I was listening to someone talk about the five main ways to be a leader. There isn’t just one way to be. I think I took the quote at face value. It’s more the reflection and the truthfulness to what kind of person you want to be. I think it has something to do with doing the right things in the right way, based on our understanding of things. I haven’t paused to think about who I am or what I’m becoming ... it’s much more about swimming in the water. I would say that, in the last few years, I have felt more grounded in who I am and less about how that’s perceived. I’m more at ease in my own skin and appreciating myself. It seems like, when people feel that way, they communicate that. It’s not just confidence but more of a comfort in your own skin with who you are as a person. Maybe that’s the moral piece ... it’s the same way a parent of a toddler can say and do all the right things but really the child picks up on the nervous or loving state of the parent. That probably has more impact on their development and that translates into adulthood, too. I have noticed the impact comfort in your self has in the work environment.

In this part of our conversation, Gary emphasized the importance of reflexivity to understanding self, as well as exemplifying the multiple narratives that we draw from in thoughtfully determining our actions. While Gary rejected the idea that he consciously works at being, “I haven’t paused to think about who I am or what I’m becoming,” he also articulated that he is “more at ease in my own skin and appreciating myself.” It seemed that reflexivity was so integrated in Gary’s being-in-the-world that he was intuitively reflective. Decidedly, he was an active participant in thinking about
how he thinks, as well as comfortable in drawing on metaphors and poetics to understand both the world and his relationship to it. His thoughtfulness and optimism were inspiring.

JEFF

We began this interview by talking about a posting Jeff had made in his journal and the relationship between the posting and the Shotter and Cunliffe quote.

I thought it’s a little bit of the chicken and egg. We are our actions. Our actions define us. Yet, as the quote says, unless you have a sense of who you are as an individual, then obviously that shapes your actions. Yeah, I did think a little bit of the chicken and egg.

I agreed with Jeff that the quote could be seen as circular and asked if it is difficult for him to know which comes first, reflection on action, or action and then reflection.

Yeah, the actions we make on a day-to-day basis. Yeah ... where do those choices come from? Maybe not so much chicken and egg but nature vs. nurture? It’s not what to do but what kind of person to be. When we execute certain actions, we get feedback on those actions. That feedback shapes who we are. Yeah ... I guess part of my leadership context, if you will ... I've done any number of the personality inventories and leadership inventories and I know that I have a tendency toward conflict avoidance. There are times when I wished that I had taken more risks and to really stand up against the developments that I saw in the company. Certainly there were times I had conversations with myself ... am I doing enough? Should I take a stronger stance? Am I ceding some of the bigger issues to the leadership circle?

The participants rarely ever directly referred to experiences with formal leadership development during the course of this research study. Their leadership theories (when offered) appeared to be prospectively and abductively emerging from
lived experience, with the exception of references to learning from personality and leadership instruments (Kerri, Jeff, Jess) and coaching (Dorrie) and to leadership styles (transformational, servant, heroic). In this passage, Jeff referenced personality and leadership inventories when he spoke to his aversion to dealing with conflict and was generalizing about risk-taking experiences. While examining abstractions in relation to the whole of our experience is worthwhile, it can lead to a reliance on external referents rather than a reflexive self-interpretation from within (Cunliffe 2009). I wondered if, for Jeff, there was a relationship between self-interpretation and the quote.

Yes. I think for me, when I talk about having a conversation with myself, it’s pretty unconscious. You know you’re living and working day to day as you grow up and, as your personality takes shape, there are certain values that take shape and become inherent in you. Certainly there are people that are more chameleon like, not necessarily negatively, who can easily shift from one leadership style to another. If the leadership style is more hierarchical, then they can adapt quite seamlessly, similarly for a more collaborative style. I imagine that there are leaders that can do that. I’ve seen that throughout my work life. I probably have some of that ability to adapt as well but, somewhere in there, is a line in the sand where you won’t cross. Like lying in a press release or deliberately abusing your staff or misleading investors and stakeholders ... those kinds of things. These are areas where I would like to believe that I have my personal line in the sand. Hmmm ... looking at the quote ... the difference between the two dimensions ... deciding the kind of person to be is so cumulative from all our experiences. Certainly, we can make choices from our experiences. I can’t think of a crisis or a personal moment when I said this is the kind of person I’m going to be. Making choices around what I’m going to do though ... there does seem to be day-to-day choices about whether to turn left or right. Deciding who I want to be is rare in my life experience.

I agreed that many people would identify much of what we do day to day as intuitive rather than intentional. I asked if he had deliberately chosen to conduct his work in a certain way.
I’m not sure. I think it was more of a way of coping. When you find yourself in a position where you no longer have executive support, you still find ways to cope and still do the work. I think it’s just adaptive, in the sense that, I wanted to be true to myself. If I come to a real hard point where I had leaders telling me to stop doing what I’m doing, then at that point, you look for opportunities to do it elsewhere. It’s a company’s choice, if the leader wants to approach business differently, it’s the board’s and leader’s prerogative. I used to laugh with colleagues when I would say I’m really not aligned with how the president is leading the company and I imagine he is not losing sleep over that! It’s his job to run the organization in the best way he sees fit. It just means that someone with my skill set is put to use somewhere else.

I said, “That strikes me as a pragmatic response …”

Well, it’s a business saying. When you look at broader social justice, then that gets interesting. Then on broader social issues are you as pragmatic? When we talked earlier about leaders I admired, I mentioned the leader at an international organization. His philosophy is we’re not here to be pragmatic we’re here to be idealists. To create the world we want to live in. That’s a whole different way to move forward with leadership and social justice.

I was interested in Jeff’s attraction to this overarching narrative and I wondered if he was engaged by this idealistic way-of-being. “Yes, but it’s also intimidating.” “In the sense of …?” “In the sense of it being difficult to be an idealist.” I wondered if Jeff saw this as a more visible stance.

Yes that’s part of it. That probably ties back to my work. You know the visible stance, compared to doing what I can, in my sphere of influence … I think in our last conversation I mentioned visiting Tibet. There were opportunities for events and I wondered whether to participate and I passively let things go by, without being visible or taking a stance.

In the foregoing, Jeff shifted from abstractly inquiring about whether he has been conflict avoidant in his career, to reflexively self-examining whether he was active enough and visible enough in Tibet. This demonstrates the phenomenological
principle of studying being and consciousness as processes embedded in lived experience (Merleau-Ponty 1962) and that, on reflection, yield rich information “about who we are and what to do—and in those choices lie both uncertainties and opportunities to realize our being” (Cunliffe 2009:90). I was curious about what Jeff felt was the most important thing to be engaged in as a leader.

The most important thing ... Well, again, it’s modeling behaviours that achieve two things simultaneously. They help the company achieve its goals but also in a responsible way. Whether that’s ethical or social ... it’s not about the ends justifying the means. The means matter. It’s modeling those behaviours. And really demonstrating success through that. If you lose the balance that the business exists for a reason. It’s not an NGO or a not-for-profit. It exists to make a profit ... how can you support the company doing that in a way that aligns your personal values and bringing those into a business context and proving that it can work.

When asked what he considered a key learning moment in this session, Jeff replied, “When we contrasted my tendency to work more in the shadows when I don’t have overt support for my approach and reflecting on the way I look at my personal life. To see the similarity.” I asked if anything had shifted for Jeff, in the time we had spent talking. “Not in the moment. No.”

Jeff’s language reflected a modernist perspective, with objectivity and pragmatism, or reason and rationality, taking the fore. This viewpoint would be highly congruent with his professional experience in the extraction industry and likely has been rewarded throughout his career. In this interview, Jeff seemed to bump up against a dominant modern narrative as he ruminated about past experiences and wondered whether his doing was congruent with his being. Although initially he did not seem to engage particularly with the quote, the conversation served as a catalyst
for reflexive contemplation on prior-lived experiences. His opening comments reflected the intertwined complexity of being and doing on an abstract and generalized level (chicken and egg), while his later comments evidenced a deeper level of self-reflexivity as he examined specific professional experiences (Tibet) and questioned himself about whether he took an active enough or visible enough stance.

Jeff appeared to move reflexively back and forth between the ideologies of pragmatism and idealism. He seemed to strongly identify with the idealist narrative about creating a world that we all want to live in, while simultaneously supporting the modern, pragmatic and objectivist discourse about the purpose of business. While not specifically naming the cultural narratives at play, or exposing their inherent assumptions and claims to truth, Jeff nonetheless recognized, articulated and felt tension between the polarities.

Jeff did not overly romanticize leadership. This characteristic was in keeping with his resilient identification as a pragmatic businessman. In this text, he highlighted a kind of behaviour that is highly adaptable to changing business contexts. He suggested that he may be capable of some of that chameleon-like conduct himself, although he is always clear on the point beyond which he will not go. This visibly reflected his strong evaluations and his identity or being. Throughout the conversation, Jeff rejected the notion that he consciously reflects on who to be; however, the text revealed some of the inner structure of his thinking, highlighting clear identifications that are evidenced by his articulation of “the line in the sand.”
Ricoeur (1984) suggests that we bring concordance to discordant life events through the stories that we weave about our lived experiences. These small stories, ultimately, become part of a larger life narrative. Similarly, Taylor (1995) proposes that we are beings with a past, which may be remembered, reconstructed and reinterpreted. Jeff’s self-narrative is very much in process, a creative work that is unending and in keeping with the notion that our lives are unfolding stories (Ricoeur 1992).

**JESS**

I began Interview Four with the quote and asked Jess to reflect on *being and doing*.

Right when you sent the email I looked at it and then again a few minutes before our call. Every morning I do some reflection and I was thinking through the weekend about where I’m at right now. How do I integrate my values in every piece of my life? So often we bucket our life as workers and it’s different from our life as a family member or spouse or friend. Are you familiar with the Strengths Finder? One of my strengths is that I’m a “connector.” I connect people and I really appreciate when I connect with people. I was asking myself if I am the same connected person with all the roles I play in my life. I believe that, if I am, then I am inherently improving each of those relationships. Who I really am is spread across the buckets. How I develop myself has come from all those different facets of my life. I was mentoring a student today and this student had grown up in a family with a lot of issues. She has economic issues and is not blending well with her peers; she’s working in a job that she isn’t connecting with. She wants to be a leader but that comes from learning in the experiences of her life. Her experiences have made her the person she is today. She is an incredibly self-aware, passionate person. She needed some time to reflect on her expectations of being an incredible leader in her new role. She needed to understand it would be the experiences in her new role that would build her into the leader she wants to be. So often we think we should be a leader in every role we’re in. Sometimes we need not to be the leader but to practice the skill set of listening. And relating. The knee jerk is to always be the leader ... we need to ask what builds a leader? If I’m a leader at work, how can I be a leader in my family? Even if the role changes, the values should stay the same. We need to understand that the skills are the same but it will look different depending on the role.
Jess seemed to be grappling with multiple representations of leadership (heroic, servant, dialogical) and how those behaviours play out across the various roles in life. There is a subtle equation of leadership with the “correct answer” and the notion that listening and relating are not leader-like practices. This is interesting in that Jess demonstrated throughout the inquiry the ability to listen well, relate to others and to reflect on her learning. The end of the passage reversed this somewhat, by clearly stating that a leader’s values and strong evaluations should be consistent across roles while being contextually appropriate. My experience of Jess was that leader practice, for her, equates to listening and relating. Jess’s perspective highlighted the richness, diversity and complexity of the phenomenon of leadership. She saw herself as a leader across many subject positions and was making sense of what leader practice looked like in these very different situations and contexts. An important part of this study of relationality and leader practice has been to listen to leaders talk about leadership, to explore their experiences with the phenomenon and to plumb their beliefs, values and feelings about leadership. A significant part of this exploration has been to examine the different versions of leadership participants have assimilated and how that may or may not correspond to their beliefs about how to be with others. There can be contradictions between the level of meaning (beliefs, values, orientations) and the dominant discourse or narrative within the context (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2003). Within reflexive dialogical research, this can be fertile ground for self and critical reflexivity.
Completely ... we talked about the level of respect that you get. Entrepreneurial characteristics are completely different. You don’t necessarily have buy-in at the beginning. It’s a leap of faith. That begs the question, how do I enact leadership ... how do I take a risk ... how do I take initiative. I may not be exactly the same way in my family, because there may be some risk. Something that I’m trying to do, is to be the same in my family as I am in the academic setting. How much better would it be if I could work on the same characteristics in different settings. Nobody is perfect but, if you look at politicians, it’s not perfect but in their lives they have sacrificed to become leaders in these positions. How do I, as a female, in the educational space really be a transformative leader and also have a fruitful family life. I am curious in the business education space if I can really truly balance those things ... can it be done without making drastic sacrifices? How do you continue to be the best person you are in all the spaces of your life?

In the foregoing, Jess (as with other participants) switched her pronoun use from “I” statements to “you” statements. This may have signalled shifts in her perceptions of self or refer to other narrative explications of self (Harding 2008) or simply signified the generalization of a practical, in-the-moment theorizing (Corlett 2012). I wondered if she was asking how to lead within her family and if it was possible to attain congruency across many life positions.

Yeah ... if I’m a leader as a mother, do I need to meet with other mothers? I am a lead-by-example person. Do I do that as a mother, spouse, friend ... as a runner? Am I leading in all the facets of my life? You see examples of leaders making sacrifices in the workplace. When it comes to social justice, there are many leaders who have done this. Working in Guatemala was truly a sacrifice and I don’t know how to continue to grapple with the other parts of my life in a way that is healthy and long term.

Jess seemed to be asking what she would need to sacrifice in her work if she chose to focus on her role as a mother. More than that, she seemed to be asking if it was possible to engage fully and without sacrifice in all the roles she may chose to play in her life. She was engaging in an exploration of the dominant narratives about
the various positions that she held, while simultaneously challenging the normative discourse. Her narrative reflected shifting identities as she meditated on the contingencies of her various situations (Wetherell 1998).

I think, in the past, I have made work my whole life, by living in certain places for work. I have seen that it can be unhealthy to do work that way. It can come at a price. Naturally, lots of leaders place high expectations on themselves. To leaders who excel, they have high expectations. I have set my expectations only after I have placed priority on other parts of my life. I have had a lot of life stuff happening. Buying a house, getting engaged, but I work alongside a co-worker who has a master’s and has a similar position to mine. He doesn’t have a significant other at this time. He is putting in a lot of long hours. Our characteristics are quite different. To me, 10 hours in a cubicle isn’t necessarily as effective as putting in 5 hours and getting a lot done. Coaching the 5th grade girls that I do, means leaving early. The narrative is, well, you are leaving early again. I’m reflecting on how I counterbalance that stereotype. It’s sometimes seen as you’re not here very often. I have talked to at least a dozen other woman about how that feels and thinking about the constant pressure. I have a lot of life things happening right now ... it’s not necessarily who I am but what I’m going to do in these situations. I can’t place priority on work and work only. I am more interested, as I transition, in how I keep a balance. I’m aware that it’s not possible to put in 110 per cent in everything I do. I’ve become more deliberate in where I place my time ... being a balanced leader isn’t necessarily valued at work. It’s the same thing with reflection; it’s often not valued until after it’s done. I think these things will have a long-term impact on myself as a leader.

I asked Jess if she was saying that she’s in a place where she’s holding the tension between her narrative of what it means to be a leader and her values.

It’s a little bit tangential I think. A lot of these circumstances can change who you are as a leader. It feels silly to say I’m a different person when I’m here, than when I’m there. Certain characteristics are required by the different roles. My boss does an outstanding job as the director of our institute. He’s very principled and diplomatic but he’s also a guy and when I ask how he does it, he always goes back to, well I have Lisa. I can’t be both a Lisa and a Brent. That’s what I’m grappling with. How do you make the transition and continue to build on the leadership characteristics that you’ve developed?
Jess was underscoring that little has changed for women who work in organizational cultures that have been designed by men for men. Bolden et al. (2011), in their analysis of leadership and gender, suggest that women are still pressured to adopt working hours and patterns that are reliant on having a partner to take care of domestic responsibilities. While much has been written and theorized on gender, the lived experiences of women in the workplace seem to have changed very little. I appreciated that Jess was feeling frustrated by a work environment that seemed out of sync with what it meant to be a relational leader. At this point, I invited Jess to speak to the practices that help her stay rooted in a relational way-of-being.

That’s a tough one. I try to build disciplined habits and to have a schedule. I feel most normal when I feel a sense of purpose and know where I’m supposed to be. To have some sense of certainty is important. Reflection and journaling is an important part of my day. Reaching out and mentoring has an impact on me and the student that I’m working with. I am trying to be more deliberate about things. Both the conversations that I have had with you and a little more heightened communication with people in my life. I’m trying to communicate how I’m really feeling. I’ve been thinking about what transformational communication looks like.

Jess was very comfortable with the language of leadership and I wanted to be sure that I understood the meaning she placed on the term transformational.

It’s not taken from any kind of academic theory. I think of transactional as opposed to transformational. Transactional is routine, transformational is more rare and requires more energy and effort. It’s the kind of communication that changes us and moves us forward. When you go to breakfast with someone on Sunday morning, are you talking about what you can’t remember (from the night before) or are you asking hard questions and really connecting with others. It’s getting straight to the point of where I’m at and what I’m struggling with. I’m trying to be more proactive with my bosses. They’re very transactional … so I’ve had to be more intentional about communicating with meaning.
I commented on how concisely she was able to articulate what is sometimes a buzzword in leadership speech and literature. I appreciated her clear distinction between routinized conversation and meaningful, sometimes transformative, interaction with others. Jess seemed to be expressing that a relational way-of-being is a constructive, dialogic process of meaning making (Corlett 2012). “Yeah ... it’s being aware and trying to make it happen that creates a lot more meaning.” I was curious if she was saying that what’s most meaningful is how she is doing what she’s doing.

Yeah ... the reporting out is important and some things are transactional but the more important question is what’s really burning right now. Those questions are the ones that matter in a lot of ways. What happens at work is transactional but a lot of meaning and awareness of others comes from understanding beyond the transactional pieces. I teach a bit of this. I try to help my students understand that if they understand themselves, they will grow and positively impact the business in some way.

I wondered how she keeps her concern for social justice in the forefront as she swims in an environment where she is required to do more than be.

I think about Guatemala a lot. There’s a continual fight to realize how we deploy our resources in the most effective way. How do I understand and make sense of what I’m doing right now as a component of social justice? My job right now is about growth and economic development and community development. It took me about six months to get that if the entire ecosystem is healthier, then the world is healthier. The notion that I’m working on this at the macro level. If communities are healthier, then people are healthier. I’ve also started to think that social justice is found in righting gender roles. That’s been a struggle in the mid-west. In my relationship, I have the more dominant leadership characteristics. There are less females at work who have leadership opportunities than men. Lots of people think I’m an admin assistant and I belong in the kitchen. I have started to think about gender as a way to build social justice and leadership. Working from within the higher education system. Ensuring that females feel just as valued as others and are seen as equal.
Jess was consciously integrating her passion for social justice across the multiple roles of her life. In earlier volunteer work, as well as in paid positions, the connection between her work and her activism had been more directly linked. As she gained experience and stature as a leader, she grew in her practice and moved into roles that were more influential and less hands on. Much of her thinking in the foregoing centred on how to be socially aware and rooted in activist values within all the contexts of her life. It was clear that she was making new connections around how to serve others and justice (gender, identity, social entrepreneurship). In this last passage, she neatly summarized the vibrant interaction between being and doing.

There is always something to be improved. I think it’s a constantly changing factor. Are we stopping or changing ... it’s not stagnant. The quote is incredibly dynamic. As we become more aware, we do things differently; so the way that we are doing and the way that we are being is incredibly dynamic.

Within this storyline, the participants articulated the ways that they shaped and were shaped by their relational dialogical interactions with self and with others. They spoke about being as both intentional and intuitive and as informing doing in reciprocal ways. Although the modern predisposition toward certainty still reared its head, meaning making and understanding were seen to be primarily dialogical in nature. Leader practice was actively influenced by the interplay of memory and current understandings, a reflexive reading of lived experiences and, significantly, an ongoing inner dialogue among various points of view.

The narratives beautifully illustrated self and critical reflexivity, a kind of practical reflection that seemed to help these leaders move from abstraction—
seeing leadership as a constellation of essential characteristics—to deep reflection on lived experience. Most of the stories embodied praxis (Freire 1970), a way-of-being that invites the critical questioning of our own and others’ reflexive reactions, while forming our own theories from lived experiences. Such theories became the basis for dialogue and for the co-construction of future actions. From an even broader perspective, these reflections, theories and experiences informed what we believe to be good leader practice. Within these narratives, learning was an embodied experience deriving from interactions that initially jarred our sense of self and then enabled dialogue with self and others about creating a world in which we all want to live.

**Dreaming the Impossible (Interviews Six and Eight)**

The storyline Dreaming the Impossible reflects the notion that leadership is an ideal or an indeconstructible, in Derridean terms, rather than a discrete, essentialized set of behaviours that guide leader practice. I take the position that leadership emerges as a property of dialogical interactions between people and that the slipperiness of the concept of leadership rests in its immateriality. It defies our modern compulsion to take things apart in order to understand them, to abstract, from both our selves and our experiences, objective universals that we can all agree to. Rather than looking for the bigger overarching narrative that will neatly explain leadership, this inquiry delights in the *petite histoire*, the small story, the singular and the idiosyncratic. My rendering of this is likely flat-footed and more than a little unpoetic and for that, I apologize to Derrida, who is neither. While Derrida was not included in
the theorists that informed the theoretical and methodological scaffold of this inquiry, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to explore the ideas of openness and deconstruction without honouring his conceptions.

I have struggled throughout this course of study (and throughout my career) to define leadership. I believe, with Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003), that we do not understand leadership well with our current assumptions and ideological commitments and that leadership (if it can be called that) is a fragile phenomenon. As this season of study draws to a close, I am persuaded that our confusion about the concept rests in its indeconstructible nature. One must have an ear for poetics to hear what is in the name of leadership, to discern what we are calling for, as we try to understand our most complex and pressing social issues. It is the dream of something that is never realizeable under its existing conditions. Leadership stirs us and evokes in us the desire for something beyond our present reality. We plan for what is possible (the managerial order of things) but we dream of a future that takes us by surprise and that is beyond the horizon of our present knowing and way-of-being. When we speak the name of leadership (and all that it implies in the future and the past), we are dreaming the impossible.

Much of what the participants and I discovered, in the *being* and *doing* of this inquiry, has been deconstructive in nature. Rather than deconstruct leadership (an indeconstructible), we have tried to understand the concept by opening up our lived experiences (good and bad). Deconstruction is occasionally confused in academic literature with critical theory and, in that vein, is sometimes used as a method to challenge language, master narratives, cultural assumptions and power systems.
The critical way-of-being is strongly represented in this inquiry through the emphasis on reflexivity but is not, in itself, deconstruction. According to Derrida, “deconstruction does not exist in a set of theorems, axioms, tools, rules, techniques, methods” (1996:218). “Deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one” (1991:273); instead, deconstruction is something hoped for and something that happens within. Deconstruction, while maddeningly obscure, is really “the possibility of the impossible,” an explanation that Derrida suggests is the “least bad definition” (1995:43). In the name of leadership rests the possibility of the impossible, the dream that we might live in peace with others and build a world in which we all want to live. According to Caputo, “the impossible is not the name of a logical contradiction, like a square circle but of something that shatters our horizon of expectation” (2013:84). Deconstruction does not annihilate what’s under study, but rather undoes it, opening up texts, relationships and ideas to their verdant possibilities. Deconstruction has been occurring throughout this inquiry; it is what calls us, what leads our conversation, it is the truth that is trembling within our lived experiences.

As has been clearly demonstrated throughout the text of this chapter, the participants have actively engaged in deconstructing memories, relationships, texts and ideas that frame the notion of leadership. They have embodied self and critical reflexivity as they have followed the trace of leaders and of leadership. They are aware of the myriad tracks, steps and contingencies of those who have preceded them but have resisted certitude about what leadership is and have stayed open to
the future, open to the hope of something new and better. They understand that the elements that make leadership indeconstructible also constitute it.

Within the storyline Dreaming the Impossible, there are two meaning dimensions: Freedom and Consciousness, and Openness and Deconstruction.

**Freedom and Consciousness (Interview Six)**

The narratives preceding this third storyline deeply plumbed the differences between the states of being and doing and their relationship to learning about and with others. In Interview Six, I wanted to build on the participants' highly reflexive insights by asking them to consider how they learned to pay exquisite attention to the things outside of themselves. I invited them to read David Foster Wallace’s 2005 commencement address to Kenyon College, a speech entitled, *This is Water.*

To begin our call we will be talking about your own experience(s) with what Foster Wallace calls our “natural default settings.” Here are a couple of questions to prompt your reflections:

At this point in our research relationship, it seems pretty clear that you have made the choice to get free of the natural, hard-wired default setting that Foster Wallace refers to … how did you become aware of it and what are the practices that help you to be free of it?

How did you learn to pay attention to what was “going on right in front of you and inside you?”

How does exercising this freedom of conscious choice have an impact on making socially-just decisions?

The questions were crafted to encourage reflection on the default setting (unconscious and excessive self-centredness) that Foster Wallace believes is hard-wired into us at birth. Wallace understood that this tendency, gifted to us through our modern culture, makes us almost morbidly incapable of identifying with others. He
suggests throughout the commencement speech that the way out of this insidious solipsism is to free ourselves by caring about what is happening around us. In this characteristic mash-up of hipness and profundity, Foster Wallace entreats us to consider that “the really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people, and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day” (2009:120).

*This is Water* positions real freedom as consciousness, the freedom to exercise discipline and effort in the service of others. It is a curriculum of inner significance that focuses on values and relationships, things that emerge from the inside out. “It does not require that more information be added … but it invites us to the inside of the subject matter, the Other and the Self” (Hart 2009:176). The following sections of dialogue from Interview Six, explored various perspectives on breaking free of the natural default setting to become more conscious and aware of the world and of others.

**DORRIE**

How it came to me was that it’s an attitude towards life. Did you learn how to be like that or were you hard-wired ... I think it’s a bit like the bees to honey. I developed a mastery at an early time in life where I would see patterns. If I was, in that day, in a funk, the day would be funky. If I had an appreciative mindset, then I would see it as a positive day. I don’t know if that simplifies what Foster Wallace is saying. Of course, the maturity is part of it. When you think about the current generation and the idea that the world has been designed for them. Sometimes we have to stop at the grocery store or get stuck in traffic. It’s kind of like, I’m here, so what am I going to do about it. How do I get a positive momentum going? When you talk about being in the centre or the way he describes life today, I always think about how I’ve learned from experience. OMG take note of this! I was
in a car accident once and I remember being concerned about the experience that I was having, while the woman who backed into me had a child in Children’s Hospital. It was like, “Holy Shit, here I am thinking about myself, while this woman has some bad shit going on for her” ... she was saying, “Get over this, I’ve got other stuff going on” ... all of sudden you understand how she could have done that. I’ve learned a lot of this from my team ... some of the ways they have to get it together just to come to work.

In this section, Dorrie highlighted the somewhat commonplace occurrence of being jarred or unsettled by the actions of another and taken up or preoccupied with her own narrative about it. What’s interesting is how quickly she was able to free herself from the default setting, to see the other and to have compassion for her circumstances. Dorrie was relying on her past experience to translate in the moment what was happening (I’ve been hit, where is my insurance? and what was she thinking!) while simultaneously staying open to the possibility and the promise of the present (what is happening for her? and how can I help?). The movement from self-consciousness to other-consciousness brought Dorrie squarely back to the present and only moment, in which she had the opportunity to experience consciousness, agency and freedom.
The important thing is what you’re thinking about and why, when you’re in those situations, you make the choices that you do ... The one thing we all have until we don’t, is our attention; so where we choose to pay attention and what’s happening inside of us is critical to understand ... To your question, I think some of the core of it is a kind of reflectiveness and self-awareness that can lead to a way of being that has more to do with compassion. Something that is not so unconscious and so automatic ... The discipline of meditation gave me a clear sense that I am not my mind or emotions but something else that can be viscerally aware that there is something else. When Foster Wallace talks about getting out of unconsciousness ... the gnawing sense of having had and lost some infinite thing. Freedom is that. Reflection, dialogue ... the meeting of mind and spirit ... where you feel like you’re really striving and getting somewhere. Another one I thought of is the work of facilitating groups of people ... a key is the focus on what’s happening with the individuals. As soon as the focus is on me, it’s diminished. When I’m present and aware of what’s happening with the group, it’s like practising consciousness. I hope that the freedom that Foster Wallace is talking about is freedom by being conscious. He moves it to the place where you see the day-to-day things as not completely self-centric. I have a hope that being more conscious leads to a greater awareness of how we’re being in the world. Have you thought about the paradoxes between people who appear to be doing great humanitarian things and, in their personal lives, can be not very nice? It begs the question of where empathy and humanity and the choice to act on that comes from and I think it’s related to consciousness.

Gary underscored the agentic notion of freedom to rather than freedom from. He expressed that to be fully free and conscious, for him, is to participate in dialogical relationships with others, to spend his energy in an other-focussed, meaningful and responsive way. In this passage, Gary linked consciousness with empathy, humanity and compassion and suggested that these are made possible through freely choosing self-awareness. I was particularly struck by his use of the term practice in this context. He implied that consciousness, showing up for others and staying present to them, is not an accident but rather an intentional choice, one
that is honed by practice. He highlighted the concept that real freedom is the freedom to consciously choose “the meeting of mind and spirit.”

KERRI

Right ... well that’s interesting because I think it’s almost unconscious. You know the idea that my needs are more important. You know ... you’re in my way. I think it comes from a level of superiority and it plays under our level of consciousness. We can’t even tell that we’re running it ... we feel superior to people of colour, or to people with less money or superior to kids. I feel like, when little kids are born, they wouldn’t think about being better than anyone else. No child is born feeling superior ... Gratitude is an important practice to me. I make a list of ten things I’m grateful for. I think it’s part of the whole choosing what I’ll think about, rather than running on defaults. It started out as a gratitude practice but it’s morphed into noticing my effectiveness and the things I feel good about ... I am refocusing my mind on what I’m doing well and what I’m grateful for. I think I’m more focused on a reality that I choose to think is benign or good. I choose to see reality differently from others. Choosing to see the universe as benign. If I’m in a conflict I think that we’re all just trying to get our needs met. We’re all just trying our best and making sense of the world. I don’t think of anyone as evil ... just that people are doing the best thing they know how to do ... Something about curiosity comes to mind. I feel like, if I see them like I see myself, then curiosity rises. If I’m curious then I’m open and I want to connect. If I’m curious then things go well.

In this passage, Kerri expressed thankfulness and optimism and clarified how she consciously brings these to mind as she makes meaning in her life. She exercised her freedom to choose how she thinks by focusing on what is going well. In this narrative, she explicitly stated that she chooses to see the world around her as benign. Perceiving the world in this way allowed her to align her identity and purpose with gratitude, optimism and benevolence. What’s key is her acknowledgement of messiness and complexity, that “if I’m in a conflict I think that we’re all just trying to get our needs met,” while demonstrating the ability to be truly egalitarian: “We’re all just trying our best to make sense of the world.” Kerri elucidated a
oneness about the experience of being-in-the-world, not a sameness, but rather an acceptance of, an interest in and a curiosity about, difference. The passage is a lovely example of non-dualist thinking.

JESS

Trying to understand this from the bigger perspective ... those moments of bringing to light consciousness. How do we become more deliberate about that? Who you are as a person and how you focus now helps to inform how you make those decisions when they come along. The better you know yourself the easier it will be to decide what you do or do not want to do. Faith helps me make those decisions. It’s easier for me to make decisions around who I am and what I’m doing ... Foster Wallace talks about how we are the centre of our own universe. I am the centre of my own circumstances but not of the whole history of the world. There is a lot to understand. A lot has come through nature being able to experience unbelievable things on this earth and I feel tiny. I’m grateful for being part of this giant masterpiece, even though I’m not sure where it goes.

In the preceding, Jess connected who she is becoming with the decisions that she makes about what she wants to do. She pondered how to become more intentional and deliberate in her choices, while being both intentional and deliberate during the interview. A present theme for Jess, throughout the research, was how to make life decisions that reflect her passion for leadership, serving others and her faith. She rejected Foster Wallace’s notion of the “skull-sized kingdom” in favour of describing responsible agency in her own terms. Jess, like Kerri and Lex, viewed the world as fundamentally loving, beautiful and benign, a “giant masterpiece.” This conscious choosing, for Jess, was inextricably interwoven with her faith. Her life choices to work toward access and equality for others sprang from a desire to live out her faith as a way-of-being, a Kierkegaardian existential truth.
Nicole articulated a shift in her way-of-being from choosing comfort to choosing meaning as, ultimately, more fulfilling. Foster Wallace suggests that, “if you worship money and things – if they are where you tap real meaning in life – then you will never have enough” (2009:103). Nicole asked the question, who am I in the world? She found that the nexus was not individual or cognitive, but rather communal and intersubjective. Her narrative did not offer a theory of leading but, instead, ontological insight into a different way-of-being in relation to others. Nicole exemplified “knowing-from-within” (Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011:1442), a kind of practical wisdom that drew on a sense of herself, her lived experiences and her strong evaluations to help her understand her world. She highlighted the intricate dance of taking care of herself while being mindful and attuned to others. In this passage, she freely and consciously chose to step off the hedonic treadmill (Diener et al. 2006) to respond to the call of the other.
I think any number of clichés come to mind about the unexamined life. I think that was what occurred to me ... I think the default setting, whether that’s hard-wired or whether that’s something we absorb through culture, is something to ponder. I found myself pondering the fact that we see the universe only through how it relates to us. Foster Wallace’s suggestion that not seeing the cashier or the woman in line as more than the generic other who is in the way of meeting my needs, that they are just there to frustrate me. That really struck me in his piece ... I was reflecting on that a bit. I certainly don’t consider myself a graduate on the path of seeing other rather than self. I really couldn’t finger it. I may have touched on growing up in the 1960s and 1970s. There was something in the air that encouraged people to look beyond the self and be more social and environmental and global. Certainly having an upper-middle-class childhood gives you the opportunity to raise your line of sight. My day-to-day needs were covered perfectly comfortably ... I didn’t have three part-time jobs in high school. Obviously there’s the influence of my parents and my peer group. You get to a university setting, in the liberal arts, being encouraged to take a wide spectrum approach to education as opposed to a trade. I can’t think of a particular moment, I think it was all those things combined.

In this passage, Jeff outlined the enabling circumstances that allowed him to see the need for social awareness and encouraged him to seek roles that had social justice as an outcome. He elucidated the ways in which his culture, history and situatedness have contributed to a developing self and other awareness highlighting agency while embedded in a symbolic, material and sociocultural world (Markova 2003; Richardson et al. 1998; Salgado and Clegg 2011). Jeff’s story, while highlighting his obvious advantages, did not reveal his own inner motivations or the inner structure of his thought as it relates to his awareness of others. As was characteristic of Jeff, his narrative was somewhat generalized: “I can’t think of a particular moment, I think it was all those things combined.” He did not directly speak to
an explicit experience where he was aware of his default setting or to a particular set of beliefs that helped him make the choice to be conscious.

LEX

Closed-mindedness equals imprisonment. We need to choose how we think and what we pay attention to ... I am now much quicker to look at the judgment I make and say, “Oh, isn’t that interesting.” I believe that people are innately good and that they do the best that they can. No matter what people do, it’s a more authentic way to be and I don’t lose hope. If I can have these thoughts that are internally coherent and examine my judgments and my default setting and I believe that the world is beautiful and caring and loving then I don’t even have to think that I’m doing this from a social justice platform. It just is ... just. I can be an activist or I can examine the role I play and the impact I have. The choices I make are the only ones that I have any control over ... Yeah ... I can look back at the things I’ve done in my life and understand that whatever I did, in that moment, I was making the best and only decision that I could have made. I can say, “Holy shit, what was I thinking?” Understanding that doesn’t absolve me but it doesn’t mean that experience defines who I am. Even people who are on death row may have to be locked up but we can still have love for them ... What does it mean to really understand the non-dualist view? With me that really resonates ... it’s not interdependence but the same. A oneness. If I look at anybody I allow myself to be present with ... very quickly there’s no separation. And it can be complete strangers. What does that say about the whole notion of spirituality and connectedness? There’s this joyous turmoil that I’m feeling these days and this dialogue is always bouncing around in my head and with others. I find it very invigorating ... I reject the whole notion of original sin. I think original sin is not exploring who I am and what I think ... Why aren’t we all more aware and why don’t we embrace freedom?

In the preceding, Lex encapsulated what it means to choose consciousness and freedom and how that choice leads to socially-aware action. First, like Kerri and Jess, it is making a choice to see the world and people as inherently good. It is also to bring personal judgments and thinking into alignment with the notion of the world as beautiful, caring and loving. Central to this philosophy is an ownership of distortions in thinking and how those become the default setting. It is a working out
and a working toward oneness with others. Within Lex’s narrative, there was an intense inner questioning and a shifting toward a state of mind where profound questions about responsibility, agency and meaning were pondered. Rather than this being arduous, he saw it as “joyous turmoil.” In this section of narrative, Lex underscored the necessity for self and critical reflexivity, relating that if he did the work of staying present and being conscious with others that quickly there was no separation between them. He suggested that social justice and freedom are to be found in this stance: “If I can have these thoughts that are internally coherent and examine my judgments and my default setting and I believe that the world is beautiful and caring and loving then I don’t even have to think that I’m doing this from a social justice platform. It just is ... just.”

A common thread running throughout all of the conversations with the study participants was the ethical and moral nature of our relationships with others. If we are intersubjective beings and if our lives are intertwined with the lives of others, then we have a responsibility to be open, aware and present in our relationships with them. And beyond that, we have the responsibility to act with character and self-constancy so that in being accountable to others, others learn that they can count on us (Ricoeur 1992). Cunliffe and Erikson suggest that responsibility is not something that can be formalized, but rather responsibility “is fundamental to and situated in, everyday relationships. This is relational integrity” (2011:1439). An important perspective within the hermeneutic view is that dialogic relationality encourages a reflexive stance that enables people to consider the quality and worth of their motivations. “Inherently, humans seek to bring their experiences and actions in line
with their strong evaluations, with their overall sense of the good or a decent life, which itself evolves with experience" (Richardson et al. 1998).

For the study participants, a significant aspect of being free lay in making the choice to pay attention, to be conscious and aware of others, thus:

Lex: We need to choose how we think and what we pay attention to.

Kerri: I think I’m more focused on a reality that I choose to think is benign or good.

Jeff: I think the default setting, whether that’s hard-wired or whether that’s something we absorb through culture, is something to ponder.

Nicole: I don’t feel good if I’m not living well with my conscience ... You have to take care of yourself but at the same time you become more attuned to keeping in mind what’s important for others.

Jess: Trying to understand this from the bigger perspective ... those moments of bringing to light consciousness. How do we become more deliberate about that?

Gary: The one thing we all have until we don’t, is our attention; so, where we choose to pay attention and what’s happening inside of us is critical to understand.

Dorrie: Did you learn how to be like that or were you hard-wired ... I think it’s a bit like the bees to honey.

Openness and Deconstruction (Interview Eight)
Deconstruction is the search for the indeconstructible in a given order (justice, democracy, love, hospitality, leadership). It is the search for an ideal that never really exists, that is instead a promise, something that is always coming but never quite arrives. Whatever is present to us, whatever exists, is contingent, situated, historical and therefore deconstructible (institutions, corporations, NGOs, contemporary
management practices, senior executive tables, leadership development, leaders) in the name of the indeconstructible. It is what calls to us within a text, thing or event. It is the nature of the indeconstructible to never be fully realizable or finalizeable and it is easier, by far, to talk about what deconstruction is up to rather than what it is (Caputo 1997, 2013). “Deconstruction takes place, it is an event that does not await the deliberation, consciousness or organization of a subject” (Derrida 1991:274).

Deconstruction is always happening.

Each of the participants to varying degrees demonstrated deconstructive impulses as they questioned, discerned and spent time knocking at the text (Gadamer 1984). This involved demonstrating candidness in each conversation and listening intently to what was emerging in the dialogue. Ultimately, deconstruction is the call to openness, to the possibility within things, people and events. It is about the future (always to come, à venir) and the worst violence would be to shut off a person, event or text from its possibility through absolutism and certitude. The deconstructive impulse is to take interest, with Derrida, in the unpredictable, the unforeseeable and the novel. Within deconstruction, Derrida is urging us to stay open, to dream the impossible.

As with all the conversations, Interview Eight provided rich narrative data for the third storyline. Penny and I shared this final interview and invited the participants to prepare for this session in the following way:
Please give these questions some thought over the next couple of days. We are looking forward to exploring them with you.

From our conversations throughout this research process, what have been some of your personal insights, moments of critical questioning and revelation/connection with the ideas on leadership and social justice that have been explored?

What were the moments in the process that triggered these insights, critical questions and revelations for you?

Why were these the important moments for you? What is the impact they are having and/or what dilemmas, questions or possibilities are they raising? Have these resulted in order or chaos for you in your thinking about leadership and social justice?

On our first call we asked you to reflect on leadership and social justice in the world today. Has anything changed for you in what you are aware of or how you are thinking about leadership and social justice now?

Narrative inquiries, particularly those that focus on relationality, dialogism and reflexivity, frequently follow the meandering path reflective of conversation. In this last meaning dimension, I will highlight moments where openness was reflected as a leaderly way-of-being and where deconstruction seemed to be occurring. These last conversations serve as a hermeneutic of leadership. Rather than an explicit description, their musings are co-constructions of a fragile phenomenon within a frame or horizon. Their ponderings demonstrate discernment and insight and, like all interpretation, does not derive from a rule. As Caputo proposes:

Rules don’t go all the way down. But interpretation does—that’s hermeneutics, in a nutshell. Interpretive skill in the face of situations that are not ultimately rule-governed—that is the heart of any sensible idea of reason, truth and wisdom in the postmodern condition. [2013:211]
In the following narratives, the participants responded to the questions we asked on their learning throughout the inquiry process and to the question on order and chaos.

**JESS**

I think I’ve always considered myself to have multiple identities ... who I am as an athlete, who I am as an academic. It’s really about being authentically me in every role in my life. It’s finding the right kind of feedback. For me, this process has brought more mindfulness around the hats that I wear and how am I bringing myself authentically to this, rather than harp on the thought that others don’t understand what I’m doing [...] Who I am as a person when social justice isn’t a big part of my role. What does it look like for me as a person in the business academic world and I how can I be an advocate and empower females.

Jess was describing a way-of-being that acknowledges the fluidity and dynamism of identity, while underscoring her strong evaluations about the need for social awareness and activism across her multiple roles and identities. In this passage, she was openly exploring the way her identity is continuously shaped and reshaped by the roles that she plays. She was actively reconfiguring and reconceiving her moral maps about social awareness, justice and activism as she explored new ways to express this (feminism, gender, academia). She was creatively using the tension between her self-identity and her athletic, academic and business roles to narrate and integrate her identity across her life.
Related to entrepreneurial thinking, there’s never just order. It’s always about how you use the chaos to birth something new. I’m a bit tangential … my supervisor describes me like a squirrel. I operate best when there’s lots of chaos. Sometimes that leads to overcommitment but it keeps me refreshed and making the inner connections that are important for me. There are more “aha” moments when there is more chaos. I value chaos … there can obviously be too much but I operate in a place where chaos and simplicity can go hand in hand. The concept of slowing down is also important, because I believe in beauty and slowing down. I think there’s meaning in blending those two. We want to walk through life running and also enjoying the moment.

Jess was defining a prudent mix of ordered disorder: “I operate in a place where chaos and simplicity can go hand in hand.” This is a Joycean neologism describing chaos-in-cosmos or “chaosmos” (1999:118). It reflects the notion of tension with a rhythmic balance that allows for the novel to emerge within a given system, just enough disorder (chaos) to throw things off balance without falling into anarchy. “It’s always about how you use chaos to birth something new.” She was describing the nexus of deconstruction in tandem with the attitude of discernment necessary to respond to it.

NICOLE

“I guess it widened the lens. I’ve always viewed myself as open-minded. I think for me, it broadened even further the realm of possibilities. Looking for new insights through the whole process.”

A key characteristic of relational leadership, as I have come to learn from this study, is openness. In this section, Nicole narrated herself as having been felicitously open to new experiences and possibilities within the research. She underscored that it is the pursuing of learning that matters, rather than convergence
on a given outcome. Within this text, I understand her to be saying that what matters is the sincerity of our seeking and the quality of our insights that open up

the realm of possibilities. Yeah that’s the crux of it! Seeing every situation as multidimensional. Rather than it being 2-dimensional it’s like 3D. Many, many issues can play into one situation or event. Acknowledging that is important. It’s easy for people to simplify issues and to levy judgment. There are so many things that aren’t considered. It’s easier to say we need gun control or to judge someone as crazy, than it is to really ask, what does this mean?

In this passage, Nicole was highlighting the need for a hermeneutics of leadership. She identified the situatedness of being in a given time and place (always already) having a set of predispositions that the situation called her to closely interpret (deconstruction). She was actively looking for ways to keep the future of an event open through discerning the multidimensionality of every situation.

JEFF

One of the insights was around social justice being closer to home, rather than it being out there. Particularly being outside Canada and outside my world or my circles [...] The greater part of the focus though, is external. This process made me realize that one doesn’t need to look far to find social justice interests close at hand. I can interpret the news a little differently than I might have three or four months ago.

Jeff’s insight revealed a thoughtful shift in his thinking toward social awareness and justice issues as not being over there (abroad), but rather here (Canada). This expansion of his perspective, in tandem with a reduction in geography, opened up new possibilities. It made the broader and more general frame of justice issues in the world more specific and particular, closer to home and ready to hand. In this passage, Jeff recontextualized and resituated social justice in a way that allowed him the possibility of continuing to engage and contribute in a pragmatic way.
Just engaging in the conversation created both. It provided an opportunity for me to think about and talk about social justice issues, particularly now that I’m not working for a corporation. It was an opportunity to talk about that, on a semi-regular basis and that brought both order and chaos. It made me think about social justice, rather than social impact (chaos), the order was in the cumulative opportunity to share your thoughts with the two of you and the other participants. It brought more data to work with.

In response to the question on order and chaos, Jeff highlighted the creative nature of dialogue and the new possibilities realized through multi-voiced conversation. He suggested that the cumulative sessions over time with the researchers and the other participants resulted in both order and chaos. The dialogical, intersubjective and constitutive nature of the conversations, for him, allowed for new information (“data”) to surface and stimulated new ways of thinking about the proximity of social justice issues. Throughout this inquiry, Jeff exhibited a questioning stance, staying open to the present moment and exemplifying Bakhtinian dialogue through “questioning, provoking, answering, agreeing, objecting” (1984:285).

DORRIE

It’s the opportunity to move beyond the surface. All those things that we’re driven to fix just to get it moving along. This way of thinking pushes you to be critical of what you’re doing ... to take the time to reflect on what you’re doing. To make the application. One of the other things I have been reflecting on ... is how organizations can use these social justice themes and embed them in management development. Often what we have is pieces of this and pieces of that. There is a tremendous opportunity for skills coaching around this kind of growth. Often you’re excited about what you’ve learned but what happens when the workshop is over? There is nothing that helps you to keep it alive, to reflect on it and embed it. Coaching is much more purposeful as a way of embedding new skills.
In this passage, Dorrie offered a significant insight into her personal learning. She identified the quick-fix narrative so characteristic of modern organizations and suggested that critical reflexivity is crucial to “moving beyond” the surface in grappling with complex social issues. The phrase “pieces of this and pieces of that” highlights the fragmentation that often exists in the organizational context, making contemplation and thoughtful progress challenging. Dorrie seemed to be advocating for the time and space to keep social awareness and concerns front and centre as part of a way-of-being for managers. On a deeper level, she was reflecting what Ricoeur calls “ethical intention aiming at the ‘good life’ with and for others, in just institutions” (1992:172). Given the gravity of the moral, ethical and social nature of the dialogue and the importance of the subject matter, getting it right is vital. Dorrie was expressing the openness required to challenge her deeply-held beliefs and strong evaluations, while having those same beliefs and assumptions challenged by others. The testing of ethical commitments through dialogue helps to refine and deepen the collective understanding and leads away from instrumental and ineffective means–end thinking. To be relationally responsive does not necessarily mean to hold abstract moral positions, but rather to participate in a dialogue from one’s own position, open to change and challenge, working toward discovering what’s possible in the seemingly impossible.
I think just the broad experience of those respectful, reflective questions that created a space for me to have more questions. It has been such a respectful process of awakening and encouraging the next step for me. It’s been such a solid and awesome process. Learning from both of you and the opportunity to be with other leaders in a more meaningful and purposeful way. The other thing is being much more in tune with the fact that some things are not what I’ve always assumed they are. I have really been purposeful about not putting things into the right slots or to fix things or to do and act, but rather to sit back and think and to engage people more deeply. That has been a big part.

Dorrie is immersed in a culture that is deeply rooted in modernist assumptions about science and rationality, a culture that sometimes conflates truth with objectivity, logic and reason. It is a bucket-thinking culture, “dividing beliefs and practices up and setting them apart from one another with analytic clarity” (Caputo 2013:19). Dorrie sees the profound imperative for leaders to engage in ethical, moral and relational activities that do not frame people as assets, costs or capital. An intent listener, she has built on her own considerable wisdom and knowledge through connecting with others in a “meaningful and purposeful way.” Throughout this process she has reflexively challenged institutional truth claims, language and her own assumptions, thoughtfully knocking at the text until something new emerges. In doing this, she has increased her capacity to hold the tension of ambiguity. The deconstructive urge “to sit back and think and to engage people more deeply” opens Dorrie up to the novel, the new and to emerging possibility, while enabling her to step back from the modern predisposition to “fix things or to do and act.” During the course of the research study, she regularly challenged the organizational way-of-being and stepped into something far more fitting and in alignment with her socially-aware self-narrative.
Our conversations have provided some turmoil and opportunities for looking at the way that events impact me. If it’s negative and intense in a traumatic way, like with gender issues, for me to be in a place to build a wall around myself so I don’t get impacted ... how do I hold this info so that my decisions attempt to reflect the notion that the universe is a kind and generous space. Knowing that there might be some anger and that there needs to be action. Most of my interactions are local and they all need to reflect a broader understanding and acceptance of what’s happening in the world. I need to look at the beauty and love that exist right beside the horror and the trauma that people experience and not to lose hope and faith, without being reduced to immobility. Embracing the process and the possibility of love and generosity. This is a very conscious kind of approach and engagement and not a detachment.

Lex’s narrative personified the human as a self-interpreting being and human existence as a becoming, an acting in and on the world (Heidegger 1962). His view was intersubjective and engaged. He moved comfortably between meaning systems, his own and others, not disengaged in developing decontextualized and generalized theories about what it means to be a leader. He examined his own thought processes, emotions and potential actions, while staying open to the possibility of the world as an inherently “kind and generous space.” Lex was exemplifying, in this passage, the accountability for self, actions and relationships that Ricoeur (1992) underscores in his notion of ethical selfhood perceiving conscience as a response to the voice of the other. Lex pondered his own intense and intimate response to the trauma and horror that others experience, while holding the universe as both beautiful and lovely. In this way, he was able to exercise both optimism and agency. “If I’m overwhelmed, I can just notice that with interest. Sometimes I can see the past and think that perhaps there’s another way. Perhaps that
could be right. The absoluteness of it is broken open, so that there is an opportunity to explore and go to new places. I think that’s the key.”

In this passage, Lex illustrated the deconstructive recognition of everything as interpretation, a breaking open of “the absoluteness of it.” He underscored openness and exploration as a means for revealing the fresh, the novel and the new as he pushed beyond unitary meanings:

“It’s almost like here’s the flag and to actually reflect on where I was then with where I am now and recognizing the fundamental pieces that still resonate. It’s not a straightforward process. The thing that happens is that there is a jarring, a level of discomfort, a disruption in how I was thinking or acting at that point and I was challenged. That challenge was an opportunity to reflect, even though it was uncomfortable [...] I think disruption is critical in organizations and our personal lives. It provides that opportunity for reflection and learning.

The focus on jarring or disruption underlines our spontaneous, embodied response to self, other and to others in the relationships and events that occur around us. It is, as Lex suggested, “not a straight forward process.” It is also the opportunity to see what might be deconstructing within a relationship, institution, event or text. Disruption is what gives deconstruction its movement. In opening to new ways of perceiving the past, Lex opened to new ways-of-being in the present.
GARY

How do we find the way we look at things and how does that guide us? If people are guided by a social justice view of things ... where does that come from? It’s a big question in my mind. How do we foster that oneness in people? Genuine dialogue and really being with others is a primary connection overriding the differences. These conversations have really focused that for me. There have definitely been moments when I am literally trying to slow moments down and making a human connection. Consciously wanting to do that as a person if there is understanding to be shared. When we talked about leadership I realized we all bring our biases. There aren’t necessarily right or wrong ways to be.

Gary highlighted the situatedness of being, that we are always already in the world and bring our cultural and historical assumptions and biases to leader practice. At the same time, he described an openness, an interest and a receptivity to “genuine dialogue” and “primary connection” that explicates a leader-like way-of-being that is open to the incoming of the other (deconstruction). In this sense, deconstruction is a philosophy of responsibility to the other “where everything turns on the turn to the other” (Caputo 1997:109). Gary was describing a relational turn where really being with others is a primary connection overriding the differences. I think that, when I came into this, I wondered what kind of leader am I? I am now thinking a lot more about the personal responsibility I have to struggle with the questions about what’s good or what’s right. If you ask people in the street who the great leaders are you’ll hear Mandela or Gandhi. My question is, what went on inside of these people? That’s the part that this research has stirred in me. How did they get to be where they are? I’m more interested to know what’s inside a person. It all comes back to that thing that we’ve been talking about.

Throughout the study, Gary, like me, has been fascinated by the inner structure of thinking that enables a relational, socially-aware practice. I have come to believe, through the interactions with the study participants, that empathy, compassion and
justice all emanate from seeing the other as oneself and seeing oneself as the other. In this narrative, Gary has moved far beyond looking for leadership in an entity. While he mentioned Mandela and Gandhi, he was not suggesting that we extrapolate their characteristics and create a model or series of steps so that we can all become those leaders. Instead, he was asking how they think about things differently. What might we learn about others and justice if we thought about it this way, as opposed to that?

Gary has stepped into dreaming the impossible, a space where self–other boundaries are porous (Ochs and Capps 1996) and where meaning is found in conversation with others and in the deconstruction of what is falling through the cracks of our dominant stories. Gary’s existential questions reveal a passion for a deeper truth that is struggling to be understood within leadership, a truth that is not one of rules and steps as the means to an end, but rather of an unflinching openness to the truth about the future.

**Passage …**

Throughout this chapter, the research participants generously contemplated how they and others hold a high degree of social awareness placing human concerns as primary in their decision making. They reflected on their self-narratives and considered how their identities have evolved through dialogical relationships with self and with others. For most, this experience strengthened their way-of-being, affirming their leader practices, encouraging fresh insights and inspiring further
questions about the fragile phenomenon of leadership. It is an open and ongoing conversation that remains unfinalizable.

Throughout the narratives, the leaders articulated leadership as way-of-being and relating to others (Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011), engaging with the researcher(s) in lively dialogue deconstructing ideas, memories and lived experiences. As is faithfully recounted in the stories, the bedrock of relational, socially-aware practice is an absolute acknowledgement of the other. Being-in-the-world is primary to this understanding. Only through being-in-the-world and acting in and on the world, do we understand and become responsible to one another. The interviews provided rich descriptions of how the participants apprehend the world and themselves and how they make meaning of their lived experiences. The conversations expressed what they choose to identify with and what they choose to make central to their way-of-being.

As was demonstrated in Interview Four, who a leader is or their being must precede what a leader does or their doing. The study participants spoke about being as both intentional and intuitive, which informs doing in reciprocal ways. The outcome of this rigorous reflection is leader practice that is influenced by a reflexive reading of lived experience, the interplay of memory with current understanding and an ongoing dialogue with self and others. The narratives underscore a kind of practical reflection, allowing the participants to shift from abstracting leadership into steps and models toward building theory abductively from lived experience about “what works.” These practical theories provide a starting point for dialogue with others and for the co-construction of future actions. Their stories about influential
leaders were refreshingly free of leadership jargon and of references to formal leadership development experiences, highlighting that leadership pedagogies often bypass our being for more rational and ideological stances of doing, which rarely align with our lived experience.

While more objectivist and positivist worldviews may find this study ethereal and impractical, to me, it only underscores the fragility of the phenomenon under study. Despite this ephemerality, the participants were more than able to speak to the practical ways-of-being that lead to a relational and dialogical practice. These are: (1) Respecting, engaging and listening to others; (2) Holding ourselves accountable to others; (3) Seeking outcomes that reflect the priorities of others; (4) Thinking about how we think about ourselves, others and the world; (5) Shaking free of the default narrative by choosing freedom and awareness; (6) Holding the tension of "chaosmic" perspectives; (7) Staying open to new possibilities in self and others; and (8) Deconstructing the master narratives about what it means to lead.

This study is about “dreaming the impossible.” It’s about revisioning leadership as an ideal that we hold, rather than a concrete series of universal steps that all can learn and apply regardless of context. In viewing leadership as an indeconstructible, we bypass our strong modernist predilection for bucket thinking. "Neat, clear, tidy, well-defined, orderly, methodical, certain, unambiguous—a place for everything and everything in its place, all the trains running on time; that is modernity’s ideal and that is exactly what postmodern thinking tries to disabuse us of by raising our tolerance for a certain optimal ambiguity" (Caputo 2013:39).
The inquiry underscores the notion of leadership as an uncontainable possibility that exists within people, texts and events but is never fully realizable under our present circumstances. It is precisely this possibility that spurs us on to examine how we think, to ask the hard questions about who we are and how we want to be with others. Leadership, the immaterial and ephemeral, may emerge when we respectfully listen to others, when we speculate with others about the kind of world we want to create and when we see the future as one of infinite possibilities.

Each of the research participants approached the overtheorized topic of leadership with respect, humility, patience and curiosity. Their openness toward the stories and quotes and their willingness to reflect on what it means to them personally, personifies what the German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, meant by living in the question.

Have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books written in a foreign language. Do not now look for the answers. They cannot now be given to you because you could not live them. It is a question of experiencing everything. At present you need to live the question. [1993:35]

In alignment with the findings of this inquiry, this excerpt from Rilke’s Letters to a Young Poet emphasizes the value of questions, openness and receptivity to a deepening inner wisdom.
Conclusion

On Findings and Possibilities

The intent of narrative inquiry is to develop “a new sense of meaning and significance with respect to the research topic” (Clandinin and Connelly 2000:42). In this inquiry, I explored the experiences, perceptions, observations and leader practices of seven people working to varying degrees in fields where social awareness, attention and consciousness are critical. The research participants came from diverse backgrounds and had varied experiences with leading from a relational and dialogical perspective. Together, however, their lived experiences suggested a view of leadership that is more collective, contextual and situated than many traditional views of leadership.

From this vantage point, leader practices are seen as originating in self and critical reflexivity resulting in other-awareness and relational responsibility. The participants amply answered my research questions about how some leaders hold a high degree of social awareness placing human concerns as primary in their decision making. The research text described experiences that shaped their view of themselves as leaders and within the context of the interviews explored and refined those awareness’s. A close reading of the participants’ stories offered a means of recognizing patterns and complexities, including the always ongoing expansion of possibility associated with a developing self-narrative. The participants beautifully
demonstrated how the self is conceived through story development and how narrative is integral to the notion of self.

Three primary storylines were identified (1) Other, Otherness and Othering, (2) Human’s Being and (3) Dreaming the Impossible. The first storyline encompassed the participants’ experiences with influential leaders and the practices that they embodied. The participants described leaderly ways-of-being with which they identified and to varying degrees emulated in their own practice. In the recounting of the stories, participants considered how these leaders related to others (or not) and explored their underlying assumptions about the worth of others, often detailing the way such exemplars had shaped their own leader practice. A prevailing theme among the stories was reflexive contemplation about how others view and experience the world and the ways that leaders create opportunities (or not) for open dialogue with others.

The participants explored being rather than doing in multiple ways throughout the second storyline. Reflexivity (self and critical) heightened the participants’ receptiveness to the phenomenal world and deepened their appreciation for how we are always selves-in-relation-to-others (Cunliffe 2009). Rather than resulting in individual and solipsistic practices, deep reflection contributed to more accountable, relational and dialogical ways of being-in-the world.

The notion of leadership as something aspirational rather than fully realizable emerged in the third storyline as participants grappled with their learning about leading and leader practice. Richardson et al. suggest that good social science is often equated with the values of neutrality and objectivity. They propose that we
need to rethink social science illuminating the “faulty premises” that “generate disappointing outcomes” (1998:497). Such outcomes sever leaders from their context and the sense of being part of a meaningful whole. Pivcivic frames this notion: “Bewilderment about the meaning of science is due to science being divorced from its historical human context … modern science although helping us to understand nature better … tends to conceal from us the world as our world” (1970:76).

The inquiry itself was a space for reframing our conceptions of social science with a focus on freedom, consciousness and responsibility for others. What this study suggests is that there is a crucial need to conceptualize leadership differently, to move away from leadership theories, assessment tools and simplified strategies, toward a focus on being, context, others and relational, dialogical practices. The study participants spoke to a leaderly way-of-being that is forged through rigorous self and critical reflexivity, an ability to engage through respecting and listening to others and an open questioning of the nature of our social realities.

This study offers only a partial view of the experience and meanings associated with a relational perspective on leading and leader practice. The participants were purposively sampled on a relatively ad hoc basis and were not representative of all those who have a serious commitment to developing a relational and socially-aware leader practice. While the participants exemplified a varied sampling of gender and age demographics, all were Caucasian and North American. Attempts to recruit participants from Canadian First Nation groups and from Latin America were unsuccessful. Additionally, in offering a narrative view of the
experience of relational leading this inquiry was restricted to leaders practising within
the arena of social justice. As I worked on the text of the inquiry, I recognized that
other researchers (including those reading this text) might well discern further
storylines that could be shared with different research communities. That aside, I
hope that this text might inspire new thinking about leadership, its enactment
through leader practice and its possibilities for creating a world that we all want to
inhabit.

In terms of the significance of this inquiry, I believe the study offers evidence of
a growing shift from an objectivist and positivist framing of leaders and their
practices toward a view that is more generative, relational, open and human. The
study offers a view of leader practice that focuses on the reflexive development of
leaderly capacity and fosters the deconstructive urge to be less than complacent
about the present. This questioning and intersubjective perspective enables the
leader to fully participate in and co-construct a “world held in common” (Sokolowski
2000:152). The inquiry challenges traditional perspectives on leadership as
something that can be understood reductively toward a conception of leadership that
is more aspirational—a becoming—requiring leaders to be intensely relational and
reflexive as they open to the incoming of the other.

As a final point, I would offer that the study afforded a thinking space for the
participants—a space and site for dialogue on relational, reflexive and socially-aware
practices. To be and become this kind of leader requires time. The rate and pace of
change that we experience worldwide suggests that leaders can no longer rely on
old formulas to produce new and innovative solutions to our most pressing and
complex social issues. It requires time to hone a more imaginal intelligence. The insights offered in this study spring from the fullness of time and our reflexive dialogical conversation. For leaders to dream the impossible they require time to think and make meaning with others. Katz and Shotter (1996) would refer to this as developing involved forms of practice where theory is prospectively constructed in practice and in storied and dialogical relations with others. When leaders reflect on themselves, their thinking and their experiences, justice follows. As Lex proposed, “If I can have these thoughts that are internally coherent and examine my judgments and my default setting and I believe that the world is beautiful and caring and loving then I don’t even have to think that I’m doing this from a social justice platform. It just is ... just.”

There is no quick fix, no executive summary, no low-hanging fruit, only the willingness to treat others as ourselves and to face the world with curiosity and imagination.

In this study, I have been more concerned with “opening up attractive vantage points than in arriving at a destination” (Eisner 1979:viii). My belief is that research should help to frame new questions and to illuminate horizons of understanding that are currently beyond us and that test the limits of existing methods. Gergen proposes that theoretical accounts should be generative as well as “challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture, raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary life, foster reconsiderations of existing constructions of reality, and, by doing so, furnish new alternatives for action” (1994:168).

In accordance with this, I offer this text as a reflexive dialogical work that might cultivate an appreciation of leadership as an aspirational phenomenon and leaders
as selves in the process of becoming. My hope is that this narrative inquiry leads to a rethinking of how we work with leaders in situ and to greater research activity, inquiries and interpretations.

“Slow” Leaders

The slow movement or movimento slow began in Italy as a protest against fast-food restaurants encroaching on cultural and historical spaces. What saved the movement from becoming nothing more than a publicity stunt was the idea that slow food is nested in a slow philosophy, one that appreciates community and culture. It heralded a new way of being, not just about food, but about living a life where there is time for connection and contemplation. Within this study, the participants referred to the state of being intentionally present to our lived experiences as “showing up.” It may be that “showing up” with a measured, sustained and deep concentration is what is required to not only shift a frenetic and fragmented culture toward wholeness but also to create a world that we all want to inhabit. Hart proposes that presence is increasingly valuable “in a society where sound bytes, flashy images, streaming media and living as perpetual nodes on an information super highway seems to be training minds for continuous partial attention” (2009:139).

Leading and its practices are in themselves a slow and contemplative process that requires us to focus inwardly on who we are being. The art of learning to live well with others is at odds with the cult of individualism, reason and efficiency presaged by modernism. As Geoffrey Wolfe suggests, “You might say that all real culture—from eating habits to artistic masterpieces — is slow” (2013:5) and warns us that the information era brings us just that, information, the most inferior and
externalized kind of knowing. For information to become knowledge and for knowledge to journey into wisdom we need time, dialogue and praxis. “Wisdom is an activity rather than a static entity. That is, we do not possess wisdom as if it were an object; instead, we act wisely” (Hart 2009:111).

As the participants of this inquiry suggested, leading relationally means respecting, engaging and listening to others, being responsible and accountable and being open to possibility. This necessitates a questioning of the ways we make sense of our lived experiences, contemplating how we think about the world around us and examining what it means to act responsibly as selves-in-relation-to-others. My question, at this interval, is how will we create the space for leaders to practise this more dialogical, reflexive and relational way-of-being? In the following sections, I offer some considerations on how to encourage relational and socially-aware leading and practice with the caveat that meaning is always in process and understandings are always unfolding.

**Moving Forward – Opportunities for Future Inquiry**

**Philopraxis**

Much of current leader practice resembles the prisoners in Plato’s *Republic*. Socrates articulates the metaphorical cave in which the masses are experiencing the world as images and shadows, their heads locked in place. What is “real” is the penumbra or the shadow of the shadow. This image aptly conveys the lack of freedom and consciousness that many leaders experience currently within organizations and is often felt in tandem with disorientation or a jarring. The choice for leaders, as it was for Plato’s prisoners, is either to choose the light and
experience the vertiginous shifting of the world ("joyous turmoil") or to be safe within the shadow of modernism’s absolutes and certainties.

This study has focused on leaders who hold others and social awareness paramount as they lead. As we journeyed together, the participants described a leader practice that is less essential and more existential, more human and in many ways more postmodern than the current thinking about leaders and leadership. Throughout our dialogue, these leaders challenged context-free interpretation, moral absolutes and certitudes, as well as the grand narratives that hold science and reason as superior to interpretation and intersubjectivity. During the inquiry, they described themselves as always already within a context of culture, history, situation and interpretations grounded by their strong evaluations (Taylor 1989). They tackled the “real” world and found it an inherently good and beautiful place.

Despite the fact that few references were made to leader development within the context of this study, my belief is that reflexive, dialogical experiences (such as this inquiry) can help to emerge leaders who will be equipped to practise in a complex world. Critical to this way-of-being is the awareness that being must precede doing and an understanding that the way we think reflects the philosophical currents of the age. If leaders are to engage the culture in order to make or shift culture, it is imperative that they understand philosophical thought, not to become philosophers, but instead to love and develop wisdom. The issues and problems addressed by philosophy form a basis for challenging our taken-for-granted ways-of-being and thinking and challenge us to be and think differently. An examination of
the trickle-down effect of philosophy in the culture can enhance self and critical
reflexivity and have an impact on leader practices. Cunliffe (2009) proposes:

It is this different way of thinking about social and organizational life as emergent, socially constructed, and inherently ideological and political, that encourages us to challenge taken-for-granted organizational realities, places upon us a responsibility for relationships with others, and forms the genesis for alternative realities. [93]

She also suggests that leaders rarely understand philosophical thought such as social constructionism and phenomenology because they have had minimal exposure to thinking that is different from the precepts of modernism. As with Plato’s prisoners, leaders have been chained to ideas and images that no longer resonate with our lived experiences. Throughout the study, the participants were challenged through quotes, articles and questions to be highly reflexive. For the most part, this way of thinking resonated and led to further insights on relationally responsive practices and how to be and act in ethico-moral ways. I am not suggesting any metaphors for this way-of-being as a leader for fear of abstracting and over-simplifying the profoundly complex. Rather, I would suggest that leaders must be liberated from their essentialist roots to reflexively explore aspects of their ideology, culture, context and relationships. It is in this reflexive and dialogic way-of-being, selves-in-relation-to-others, that moral thinking and acting follow.

Reflexivity, as a concept, is inordinately difficult to make accessible in leader practice; however, it is integral to the discovery of new possibilities and innovation. The raison d’être of leader development must be to help leaders think beyond managerial efficiency and effectiveness toward different ways of thinking about leading others.
Reflexivity, therefore, goes beyond calculative problem-solving toward exploring tensions and recognizing the ephemeral nature of our identities and social experience. It also draws on social constructionist assumptions to question and explore how we contribute to the construction of social and organizational realities, how we relate with others, and how we construct our ways of being in the world. By doing so, we can become more creative, responsive and open to different ways of thinking and acting. [Cunliffe and Jun 2005:228]

Critical reflexivity enables leaders to examine our most pressing intractable problems (Westley et al. 2006), wicked problems (Grint 2005) and irreconcilable issues. It allows leaders to reveal “forgotten choices, expose alternatives, lay bare epistemological limits and empower voices which have been subjugated by objective discourse” (Lynch 2000:36).

Knocking at the Text

Sensitivity, the keen ear, is of the essence: to listen carefully to the text, as it were putting your ear close to it, in order to hear the answer as it emerges. The process is repeated time and again, whereby we ask the same question over and over, listening constantly to the text, until it no longer answers, or speaks to us so unclearly and faintly that the answer can no longer be heard. The idea is not to reach the final answer; instead the journey is its own reward. At the end of the voyage, the question has been dissolved and a new question has begun to manifest itself, so that the journey(s) are the prize, not some final Shangri-La of knowledge at the end of the road. [Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009:122]

Throughout this inquiry, Penny and I relied on questions as a means of inviting the participants into dialogue with us and with each other. Each interview, teleconference and journal posting began with a thought-provoking question and invitation to share memories, observations and lived experiences. The linguistic construction of each question held the possibility of opening up new worlds and was pivotal to generating and encouraging divergent thought. We wanted to avoid “driving” the participants toward consensus or conveying the notion that we all had to
be “on the same page.” As with Gadamer (1984), we determined that the first condition of the art of questioning is to ensure that the other is with us in openness and curiosity. We understood that dialectic (questioning) is the art of conducting a conversation, of coming to see things in a unified way and of reaching understanding and meaning. And we believed that “what emerges in its truth is logos, which is neither mine nor yours and hence so far transcends the subjective opinions of the partners to the dialogue” (1984:331).

This focus on responsive and dialogic interaction as opposed to consensus and agreement encouraged new ways of thinking about the world. Together we wandered with the study participants, knocking at the text in search of inspiration and meaning, listening and posing questions to the participants until new meanings and knowledge emerged. Questions are at the heart of how we listen, think, imagine and relate to others. Questioning prompted the telling, retelling and recalling of participants’ narratives, making their experiences and memories affordances for further learning. Weick, in talking about social constructionism, postulates that “reality is selectively perceived, rearranged cognitively and negotiated interpersonally” (1979:164). Our meaning making is informed by our questions, therefore how they are constructed and the way in which they are asked is crucial. According to Vogt et al., “we might say then, that the shape of our lives at any moment represents the cumulative answers to all the foreground and background questions we’ve ever asked ourselves and others” (2003:107). Questions are the primary linguistic device by which we construct our world, are critical to ongoing research and are the bedrock of self and critical reflexivity. Living in our questions
(Rilke 1993) may be what enables us to distance ourselves from the “quick fix” and to produce more enduring and expansive theory as it relates to leaders and leader practice.

**Relational, Reflexive Research as Learning**

There seems to have been little progress in the theorizing of leaders, leading and organizations over the past several decades. Davis suggests that “a half-dozen paradigms maintain hegemony year after year, facing little danger that new evidence will pile up against them” (2010:705). Alvesson and Sandberg (2013) claim that despite a surfeit of research there is a paucity of innovation leading to new ways of thinking about leadership and organizations. Having spent many years as a practising leader and reviewer of leadership theory and research, I would add that there is an imminent need to explore more processes and practices that can lead to contextualized theoretical insights.

Without repeating the observations of the literature review (Chapter One), much of leader development and theorizing is established on the view that leadership theory is both consistent and serially progressive and that the business and organizational environment is static. The implications of this perspective can result in research that predicates future action on past understandings. Such studies are at best impractical and at worst both risky and irresponsible toward others. Ghoshal warns that “in essence, social scientists carry an even greater social and moral responsibility than those who work in the physical sciences because, if they hide ideology in the pretense of science, they can cause much more harm” (2005:87).
This research study was predicated on a contextualized, learning-oriented approach. The inquiry focused on heterogeneity encouraging diverse forms of thought and varied expressions of practice. Rather than holding sameness or consensus as a goal, the study explored unity and oneness, simultaneously encouraging multiple perspectives and imbuing the lived experiences of the study participants with meaning. The research design adhered to basic coaching principles (participant-centred, highly reflexive, relationship-oriented, use of questions) and deviated from purer forms of coaching in that the researchers set the agenda. The sessions cumulatively resulted in heightened self–other awareness, identity formation and learning. It was interesting to me that although the study participants had all attended various forms of leadership training, when invited to recall their experiences of developing their leader practices they rarely referenced formal development experiences. This suggests that research and learning that focuses on lived experiences may result in more generative and useful theorizing than competency and performance oriented approaches. It was my experience throughout the research journey that co-constructed theory resulted from research that was relational, dialogical and highly reflexive in nature. The participants explored and synthesized new self and critical perspectives through the unfolding of multiple understandings of leading and leader practice.

Reflexive methodologies have a greater possibility of revealing in-depth contextualized insights into leader practice. Through this guided dialogical process (Cunliffe 2002), the study participants explored and synthesized an existentially critical perspective as was evidenced by their insights throughout the research but
particularly from the last interview. The participants derived a greater understanding of themselves, their way-of-being, their context and their practice through telling, retelling and recalling their lived experiences about the being of leadership. Learning occurred from reflection inward and from observation outward (Parry and Boyle 2009). Within this context both the researcher(s) and the participants were co-learners seeking a deeper understanding and refinement of leading and socially-aware leader practice. Knowledge was produced through co-construction—the mutual sharing of memories, experiences and strong evaluations about leading. Knowledge generated in this way moves beyond the relationship of process and insight toward a new, more equal, series of revelations and lessons for both participants and researcher echoing the suggestion by Shotter and Cunliffe (2002) that people create meaning and reality with others in spontaneous and responsive ways, and that reality construction and sense making are relational processes (Weick 1995). Co-constructed research in process and practice reflects a position on leading and research that is non-hierarchical, distributed as a relational process, constructed within social interactions and processes, reflective of both mutuality and interdependence (Fletcher 2001; Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011) and grounded in dialogism (Bakhtin 1986).

The suggestions I have outlined in the foregoing are meant to illustrate, not deplete the range of possibilities that exist for inquiry in the area of relational, socially-aware leaders and their practices. We need to claim a space of inquiry for reflexive research that will enable ongoing interdisciplinary conversation and co-constructed theory building between researchers and related communities of
interest. We need to “testify to the reality of lived experience while at the same time undermining the self-evident character of that reality” (Rhodes, 2009:656).

Our world depends on it …

**Passage …**

When I began this inquiry I had many questions. I still do. It’s where I live.

During Interview Four with the research participants, we explored David Foster Wallace’s (2009) brilliant address to the 2005 graduating class of Kenyon College. He begins the essay with a somewhat banal and platitudinous story of two young fish. “There are two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, ‘Morning boys. How’s the water?’ The two young fish swim on for a bit, and eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, ‘What the hell is water?’” (2009:4).

The story exemplifies the point of Wallace’s essay, which is to highlight how the most obvious, omnipresent and important realities in life are usually the hardest to see and talk about. They are both to us, and about us, like water is to the fish.

Leading can be like doing an exuberant cannonball into the water or it can be like being thrown in head first; maybe it is both of those things most of the time. Initially, there is the shock of coldness, a deep shiver, a feeling of aliveness and exhilaration even when we have swallowed half the lake. The impact is jarring, the turmoil joyous. Ultimately, it becomes natural, comfortable and perhaps a little invisible. Despite our penchant for the state of cruise control, our preference for unconsciousness, our predilection for the default setting, there are moments when
we see the water. A feeling of unease often heralds it as though something is pinging on our ethical radar. If we take the time to listen, pay attention and reflect, we'll see that life is filled with these moments. They are the moments of real consciousness, of awareness of what lies in front of us and all around us, moments of experiencing life as “not only meaningful but sacred, on fire with the same force that lit the stars – compassion, love, the subsurface unity of all things” (Foster Wallace 2009:93).

While dreaming the impossible, a world where the indeconstrictibles (leadership, justice, democracy, love) are always possible but never fully realizeable, the research participants shared their lived experiences to give us a glimpse of leader practice that is counter to the modern monologue. Can we change the world in this way? Can we do this in institutions that are rooted in the past and that reward past notions of leadership and individuality? Can we reimagine and recreate with others places and spaces of equality and inclusion? Can we renew ourselves while leading in this countercultural way?

It will be hard. David Foster Wallace submits:

The so-called “real world” will not discourage you from operating on your default settings, because the so-called “real world” of men and money and power hums along quite nicely on the fear and contempt and frustration and craving and the worship of self. Our own present culture has harnessed these forces in ways that have yielded extraordinary wealth and comfort and personal freedom. The freedom to be lords of our own skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation... But of course there are all different kinds of freedom, and the kind that is most precious you will not hear much talked about in the great outside world of winning and achieving and displaying. The really important kind of freedom involves attention and awareness and discipline, and effort, and being able to truly care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over, in myriad, petty, little unsexy ways, every day. That is real freedom. [2009:115-121]
A much deeper understanding of the wisdom in Foster Wallace’s views was inspired throughout the research, a debt of gratitude that I owe to the seven leaders who “showed up” and had the courage to lead relationally.
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