

A watercolor illustration on the left side of the cover. It depicts a large, dark tree with intricate, branching forms in shades of blue, green, and black. At the base of the tree, a small, dark silhouette of a person stands. The background of the illustration is white, with the colors of the tree and figure bleeding into the white space.

Practice Dialogues

Listening
to the
Wisdom of
Care Work

ALICE LESNICK, editor,
and the Practice Dialogues Collective



Practice Dialogues



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LISTENING TO THE WISDOM
OF CARE WORK

Alice Lesnick, editor, and
The Practice Dialogues Collective:
Kamau Blakney, Shira Cohen,
Morgan Cook-Sather, Loretta Dugan,
Carla Glover, Lauren Lattimore, Xuan-Shi Lim,
Susan Moyer, Suzy Roman Quinn,
Ellen Stevenson, Steven Volk, Kira Wu-Hacohen



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Prologue

Reasons and Ways to Read this Book

We hope this book creates new dialogues with you, our readers. We encourage you to begin where you like and take your own path through the text. You might want to start immediately with one of the practice dialogue chapters, or you might want to start by reading how and why they were written. We hope that this book inspires you to hold practice dialogues with people whose path of care inspires you.

The audience for the book is reflected by the diversity of its co-authorship, which includes people of a broad range of roles, ages, and identities. A key audience is people starting out in care work fields, including education, medicine, social

work, counseling, somatic study, organizing, youth development, and family caregiving. The book will also be a resource in career and professional development centers to aid students in the process of vocational discernment.

Care workers already in practice are also an important audience. The book amplifies their wisdom and labor and provides a means of generating clarity about and support for what they do. It invites them to experience their work as part of a larger conception and community of care.

This book is also designed both for students and general audiences seeking a refreshed consideration of research. Taking an approach to listening to people as experts on their own experience, the book offers an access point for practitioner- and community-based research. The range of styles and registers in which it is written positions it to be read in research and writing courses where people study hybrid, dialogic, and other intersubjective approaches to writing and conversation.

Finally, the book is for leaders who want to better understand the challenges faced by the care workers whose work they are charged to support, and also rely on. In this connection, it has a role to play in professional development projects such as team building, coaching, and uplifting people's growth.

In addition to this Prologue, the book is made up of 11 individual practice dialogues that grew into co-written essays (Chapters 4–11). Chapter 1 is written by the group of writers as a whole and lays out what this collective found in reading across the essays to be cross-cutting insights of significance. Chapter 2 discusses the need to reframe care work in

experiential and academic contexts. Chapter 3, on methods and methodology, lays out the process of creating a practice dialogue. The Epilogue provides a reflection, through a concluding practice dialogue, on the origins of the book in editor and co-author Alice Lesnick's experience and positionality.

To assist you in deciding how to move through the book, we here offer a chapter-by-chapter summary:

Chapter 1: Reading across the Dialogues: Cross-Connecting Themes and Takeaways by the Practice Dialogues Collective

The group of writers collaborate in this chapter to share cross-connecting themes and takeaways from the process of creating and reading across the dialogues.

Chapter 2: Care Work as Knowledge Work, Practice Dialogue as Research: Challenging Hierarchies of Labor

Alice Lesnick discusses the origins of the project and the importance of learning from practitioners; defines and situates key terms including practice dialogues, care work, and practice wisdom; and situates the project as an intervention in hierarchies of labor (in practice and in the academy).

Chapter 3: Practice Dialogues: Methods and Methodology

Alice Lesnick discusses how the dialogues and written chapters were created and the reasons behind the methods in order to inform readers wishing to see behind the scenes as well as those wishing to engage the process themselves.

Chapter 4: Problem-Wrestling, by Loretta Dugan and Alice Lesnick

Loretta Dugan advances the concept of what she calls “wrestling a problem down” in her approach to geriatric social work, arguing that both inner and interpersonal connection form the basis for being ready to learn, which includes disinvestment from judging and maintaining concern for structures as well as individuals.

Chapter 5: A Formula for Limitlessness, by Kamau Blakney and Alice Lesnick

Capoeira Mestre Kamau Blakney shares the cultural and critical praxis of a martial artist, teaching artist, and intergenerational mentor, and discusses the philosophy of limitlessness in the context of the lineage that guides him.

Chapter 6: Powers of Attention: To Walk a Fine Line, by Steven Volk and Alice Lesnick

Historian Steve Volk describes guiding college students to learn from potentially traumatizing material without being traumatized themselves, as well as the evolution of his sense of this as a form of care work.

Chapter 7: “I Said No a Lot”: Sustained By the Success of Others, by Carla R. Glover and Alice Lesnick

Carla Glover reveals the underlying architecture of her practice as a school principal and teacher-educator, including

what may be a surprising aspect of care work: the importance of refusal.

Chapter 8: Radical Partnership: No More, No Less, by Suzy Roman Quinn and Alice Lesnick

Suzy Roman Quinn portrays massage therapy as care work, discussing the commitments of a somatic practitioner to its promise and risks, and, above all, to clients' wholeness and beauty.

Chapter 9: Watching Both, by Shira Cohen and Alice Lesnick

As teacher and union organizer, Shira Cohen clarifies one of the mainstays of care work: a capacity to attend to more than one realm within a given situation, at various scales of impact, import, and interaction.

Chapter 10: The Harsh Path to Excellence (But It Doesn't Have to Be This Way), by Xuan-Shi Lim and Alice Lesnick

Xuan-Shi Lim, a psychologist whose chosen work is to be one of the primary caregivers of her two nephews, conveys how she integrates concern for young people's individual well-being within the contexts of family, culture, and schooling.

Chapter 11: Everyone in this Room Has Power, by Ellen Stevenson and Alice Lesnick

Ellen Stevenson shares the origins and the community impact of her lifelong community organizing through personal history, and in the context of the practice of care work.

Chapter 12: Memory is Presence, by Lauren Lattimore and Alice Lesnick

Lauren Lattimore shares her work as a family historian and the love, reverence, and witness at the base of her practice.

Chapter 13: Power With the Flow, by Morgan Cook-Sather and Alice Lesnick

Morgan Cook-Sather speaks as a college student preparing for a career in health care, her twin passions for language and care work combining with her personal embrace of vulnerability to inform her preparation to support people's care and healing.

Chapter 14: A Student of the (Changing) Details, by Susan Moyer, Loretta Dugan, and Alice Lesnick

Susan Moyer, invited to and joined in dialogue by Chapter 1 author Loretta Dugan, discusses her practice of geriatric medicine as a way to lay the foundation for people to make difficult decisions with dignity in invariably challenging, complex, and changing circumstances.

Epilogue: A Book Comes Alive, by Loretta Dugan and Alice Lesnick

Loretta Dugan and Alice Lesnick provide a reflection, through a final practice dialogue, on the sources of the book in Alice's care work path.

CHAPTER ONE



READING ACROSS THE DIALOGUES

Cross-Connecting Themes and Takeaways

The Practice Dialogues Collective

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we claim key themes and takeaways of this project and offer them as guideposts to our readers. As our individual chapters joined the evolving manuscript, we became readers of one another's texts, which sometimes informed how we revised our own. Reading the

manuscript as a whole and over time also let us consider lessons learned through both the process and content of the project. The original writing for this book began four years ago! We have learned firsthand how words on a page are moments in time, and the understanding that life and change course through (and beyond) the text shapes what we want to say about the enduring meaning of our writings.

Over the course of three group conversations, we discerned the purpose of this chapter: to situate the project within the broader cultural and political context in which it has come about, to observe cross-connecting themes and takeaways for ourselves and for readers to carry forward into reading the book and into their work, and to share what the process of creating the book has meant to us.

Learning through dialogue demands a rethinking of a number of constricting frameworks that are nonetheless central to our lives. When those push us to feel and accept being limited, confined, and rushed, this project encourages us to think and move differently.

We narrate this chapter in the first-person plural, as “we,” to uplift that it grows from group conversations to reflect on the project. Drawing on and directly quoting words we spoke and notes we made during these sessions, Alice drafted the initial version of this chapter. It felt honest to write as “we” and invite collective members to revise the draft, which we have. It is all of our words.

DIALOGUE AS MUTUAL AID

This book, with its focus on growth, care, and healing, is in some ways a response to a world of trouble and in trouble. As the pandemic exposed for those not already cognizant, modern institutions and frameworks, including racism and neoliberalism, have contributed to grievous inequities, suffering, and violence. We see this in the climate crisis and war, increasing income inequality and concomitant scarcity, hunger, precarity, and loss of life, the rise of authoritarianism, the violence of daily life, and the impossibility of a living wage for millions of people. With many people questioning and divesting from institutions, we are witnessing a turn toward mutual aid and communities of care (Spade, 2020; Zerkel, 2022). Examples include personal fundraising during crises, sharing resources such as food, childcare, and public health information, and activism to protect each other's lives and rights.

This project book uplifts what we and our communities of care work are to each other; could it be considered a form of mutual aid research? To reflect and to write opens within us new voices, insights, and freedoms of thought and (inter) action. We survived schooling that told us what was important, tested us on those issues, then rated us. These dialogues help us understand and share what is real to us.

We started this project during early COVID. We are finishing it as the second Trump administration is beginning. As co-author Steve Volk said in a recent meeting to talk through

revisions to the manuscript based on the peer reviews, “I just can’t help but think that all of us are now called to be involved in care work as we make our way through what is to come.” The trend toward oligarchy in the United States and elsewhere in the world, with the growth of generative AI and other technocratic pressures on human existence, places greater strain on working people and families to access support and care for daily life. Those whose work is to create such access, support, and care are strained as well. We see our book as calling us toward one another, to our values and knowledge of what is possible when love’s abundance replaces greed. In Portuguese, the language that forms the linguistic base of Capoeira Angola, there is a term, “kerida” or “keridu,” meaning a person who is wanted, a person loved by another. What is this book but a way to recognize the currents of love among us as we live?

CARE AS PRESENTNESS

Through writing this book, we’ve learned to more deeply acknowledge that care work entails being present. This may seem obvious, but it’s worth slowing down to take it in. When we are doing care work, we are there. We have to be present, give attention, and allow the situation to thread into our awareness. There’s no alternative. It’s personal, engrossing, and it takes the time it takes. It’s more like reading a novel than skimming a textbook. Care workers often

have to follow highly constrained, regulated, and overcrowded schedules. So we are often rushed. But even so, the work can't be instrumentalized or outsourced, and when it is, it suffers drastically in quality. It's human work—another analogy might be to a dance or musical performance that takes the time it takes. Except that unlike those, there is often no opportunity to rehearse, even with high stakes in play.

This is one of the reasons writing about our work by those who do it is relatively rare. The way it asks us to be present is fairly all-encompassing, and doesn't easily make room for sharing reflections far from the scene of the work itself. We're also a bit suspicious of writing about what we do, because in our experience writing exists far from the scene of the work! It can freeze things that are in motion and changing. And yet we do feel the risk involved with losing what we've learned and want to share; sometimes we want a place to preserve and care for our learning. We're glad of this one.

FROM AUSTERITY TO ABUNDANCE

Many of our practice dialogues touch on the pervasive sense of “not enoughness” that haunts care work and capitalist societies writ large. Not enough time: with individuals, to balance competing goals, to resolve severely demanding situations. Not enough money: in the systems purportedly providing structure for care, in our paychecks or in those of the people

we work with, or in the resources on offer for this work. A sense of scarcity, often the result of austerity-based public policies that favor capitalism's engines over care systems, that promotes chronic stress, anxiety, and fear that our goals are unreachable.

At the same time, our stories teach that alongside or under this squeeze is something different. Kamau Blakney calls it limitlessness; Suzy Roman Quinn calls it lovingkindness; Morgan Cook-Sather calls it taking the plunge; Carla Glover calls it passion; Ellen Stevenson affirms it when she says, "everyone has power." Abundance. Plenty. Currents of love and devotion not blocked by all the limits of the world.

On a basic level, an experience of not enough time is a condition of our mortality as well as our conditioning. In cultures marked by dehumanizing haste, a scramble to get through each day dealing with insufficiencies of all kinds, the idea of having enough time can feel like a pipedream. And yet, writing this book has given us time to make meaning of our work through slow conversation. The dialogues spotlight how we have each created our own, embodied path—over and in time. As Steve Volk wrote during one of our periods of reflection, linking our project to the US election results:

I was so struck this time around with the idea of dialogue, the importance of recursive dialogue, and the importance of slow conversations. . . . There is so much talking that we need to do in the months and years ahead; it needs to be measured, repeated, and

slow. . . . The antidote to dehumanization is humanization, and it can only be achieved by conversation, dialogue, talking over time.

Time can be a friend.

CARE WORK AS LEARNING

Skepticism toward institutions entails questions about the hierarchies that bolster conventional notions of expertise, enmeshed as these are with oppressive systems and structures. It's not that there is no such thing as expertise. It's just that it's not so simple to define. We claim uncertainty, vulnerability, and humility as part of being expert. As well-trained and experienced as we are, we often reach a point of not knowing and the accompanying risk of acknowledging it—since not knowing can be read as weak command over a subject or the lack of authority to engage.

To engage without certainty allows care workers to drop the burden of being supposed to know it all and find freedom to respond to current conditions. We find freedom, too, from fear of ridicule when thinking differently from the norm we've been conditioned to believe we should represent. This is important since it's often the norm that has created or intensified the difficulties of people we are working with! We hope our readers gain confidence to engage outside of certainty, and understand that they can learn from the engagement.

At the same time, we hope our book shows that respect for science and other traditions of knowledge is compatible with being open to questioning.

To the extent that we always build with the knowledge of others, care exists between and among individuals and communities. Care, like these dialogues, is co-authored. The process enables each person's truth to be heard, and honored, as part of the conversation. In this, hierarchy is not always necessary—though certainly there is also leadership, experience, commitment, and dedication over time. This book brings together younger (in the sense of less experienced) and older (in the sense of having been at it longer) care workers, which both credits experience and yet doesn't tag it with being "most knowledgeable" just because of that. Knowledge, in this context, is in the dialogue. In this way, knowledge is alive.

Our task as care workers is to ensure that the individuals and communities sharing the process are included as co-creators of this living knowledge. This aspect of care work makes learning a central part of it. And indeed, learning, like making space for skillful not knowing, is also a cross-connecting theme of this book. We regard care work as inviting and validating learning by all parties involved: not the kind of learning—mere data gathering—that is dispatched simply with a questionnaire or verified by a multiple choice test. Rather, we seek to foster learning that creates shared understanding and healing relationships. Understanding care work caring as co-authorship leads away from "fixing," "curing," even "helping" others (with the answers already known, and

a deficit model already in place) toward co-creating a healing path. A challenge here is making sure that the not knowing invites even those who don't feel equipped or authorized to ask questions and share in the first place.

We offer some questions to encourage our readers in working with not knowing:

How can community building and emphasis on collaborative work take the pressure off the individual to know?

How can the unknown be framed as an opportunity for circulating care and fostering connection?

How can "I don't know" be an invitation to explore, not a weakness?

BOUNDARIES, BALANCE, AND THE ARTFULNESS OF PRACTICE

Owning uncertainty is surely not the only risk care workers take. Another, perhaps more primary risk is that in being present we become involved—often in ways impossible to predict. Together with a willingness to engage, setting boundaries is an integral, ongoing part of care work. It can be challenging for people who respond imaginatively and intuitively to other people's struggles. In the lifelong work to learn how to show up without being pulled under—whether by others' expectations, by one's own sense of urgency, or

other pulls—we recognize lifelong potential to work toward compassion that includes self, and toward trust in the support at our backs.

Reading across our chapters has illuminated that care work is an art and often either tacitly or directly draws on artistic practice as part of its form and expression. Recognizing and celebrating the artful dimensions of our work clarifies that they help us hold boundaries and balance, as well. We work with people, yes, and also with the aesthetics of relations in time, space, and culture that hold us all.

INTERDEPENDENCE

In addition to claiming not knowing, learning, and artful boundary setting as central to care work, another implication of this book is that we need an expanded understanding of care work. Rather than recognize it silo by silo, credential by credential, role by role, we need to recognize the interconnection of care work in and as a broad field. We need to see how care workers operate in ecosystems of mutual support: care workers and the people we work with also make up ecosystems of human thriving, nothing so simple as one who helps and one who is helped, one who ails and one who cures. Our group discussions highlighted that the varying designations of kinds of care work reflect how different jobs are positioned (via pay, status, and security) within the capitalistic economy, not how important they are in people's lives. Care work is

skilled work, whether or not the skills involved are respected and valued as such.

No one exists outside of the need for care. As feminist scholars have long argued (Noddings, 1984), the conflation of maturity and power with independence and autonomy is best understood as a symptom of oppressive systems of inequality (including and stretching beyond patriarchy, modernity, and neoliberalism) designed to justify the benefit of the few. In fact, interdependence is a fact of life everywhere and for all living beings. Broadening our understanding of care work brings clarity to how everyone, including care workers ourselves, lives by sharing care from various positions. We hope that this broadened view will help build systems founded in interdependence as a natural fact. From this view, radical partnership, co-authorship, and co-creation are simply descriptors of reality.

CONVERSATION AS RITUAL

Our group reflections celebrated how the experience of conversation stands out against the clamor of our daily lives. Our last conversation returned to this theme as we considered conversation as ritual. We lingered with the idea that in these times, occasions to sit together in dialogue that is exploratory, not transactional, are important. We are thinking of ritual in the sense of a repeated practice humans perform, alone or in community, to enact values and create spaces of sacred

presence. Rituals are old human ways of inscribing our aspirations into time.

During this time of social collapse, the ritual of conversation is humanizing. The ritual of conversation is so crucial for keeping the dying “fire” of oral tradition burning. While technology has made it more convenient for people to come together, it is also taking off in directions that seem to dehumanize the written word. The ritual of conversation brings people together to express and share their experiences in their voice, and to co-create in spaces beyond the influence of tech.

In the martial arts tradition of Capoeira, it is said that for those who meet the uncomfortable moments of training with frequency, the rewards appear as *dance steps* that can be accessed during class and beyond to literally dance with fear.

In conversation, fear takes a step back in the scene of reflection; here we might say we dance with curiosity.

LOOKING FORWARD

This book is the start of a conversation, not a way of ending it. Join us! We invite you to read our reflections not as the last word, but as company on your own path.

CHAPTER TWO



CARE WORK AS KNOWLEDGE WORK, PRACTICE DIALOGUE AS RESEARCH

Challenging Hierarchies of Labor

Alice Lesnick

A practice dialogue is a joyful labor of attention. Like other forms of creativity, bearing witness makes a demand. To accept this weight ripens something within the listener that, once ripe, joins a stream of gifts.

My understanding of the creativity of dialogue owes much to Lewis Hyde's portrait of gift exchange in societies

(Hyde, 2007; Dalke & Lesnick, 2011). Drawing on fairy tales, ethnographies, and healing traditions, Hyde argues that the exchange of gifts, in contrast to that of commodities, connects people through personal engagement (even when giver and receiver do not know one another) and situated meaning—not wholly outside of processes of obligation and debt, but not reducible to economic transaction. He further argues that creative works, including art and care (as in the example he gives of 12-step programs), are the realization of gifts received.

WALKING, TALKING, WRITING: ORIGINS AND PURPOSES OF THE BOOK

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, I started taking Sunday morning walks with my neighbor, Loretta Dugan. While we had known each other to say hello, our friendship took root during lockdown. Loretta would share her experiences doing home visits, leading a support group for caregivers of people with Alzheimer's, and beginning to plan for her retirement from a career of 40 years in geriatric social work in the city of Philadelphia. She talked about passing some of her responsibilities on to colleagues, carrying forward others, and also what she would have to let go. Of course we spoke of other things—family, community, current events—but our conversation would return to Loretta's path. I was captivated by the way she talked about her work.

This book started in conversations with Loretta. I had not conceived of it at all ahead of this relationship. At a certain point, I realized I wanted to write something about all I was learning from our dialogue. I proposed to Loretta that I write a reflection and then, if she wished, she might join in and we could co-author a piece. My sense was to keep our dialogue going in the context of writing that in time others could learn from, as well. It felt true to our dialogue to collaborate on the writing. I also sensed that she was more likely to write in this collaborative context than if I had asked her to compose something outside of our sharing.

Spoken dialogue became written, the two modes flowing together. Process and content arose together, as well, a dialogic format suiting the themes and questions under consideration. We wrote an essay that satisfied us both, shared it with people in our lives, and felt deeply encouraged.

That text became the seed of this book. Dialogue with Loretta crystallized my long interest in how people sustain a path of care work and in how to share their practice wisdom in the spirit of the work that brought it into being. I decided to broaden the project and continue learning by inviting additional practitioners to share what they had learned along their paths, what had sustained them, and what had been sustained through them. Working with Loretta, I came to use the term *practice wisdom* to refer to this sustained and sustaining witness through observation, action, and reflection which are grounded in and by specific relationships and contexts. Practice wisdom integrates knowledge, skill,

understanding, intuition, experience, growth, discernment, connection, tenacity, humor, humility, curiosity, and love. As I will describe in the next chapter, asking practitioners about their paths of practice—conceiving of them as paths, akin perhaps to a spiritual path as distinct from a “career” or even “work”—proved a meaningful way to portray the development and deployment of wisdom.

I was led to adopt the term “practice wisdom” at a point when Loretta shared an early draft of her chapter with a mentor of hers, Nancy McWilliams (quoted in chapter 4). Nancy McWilliams wrote Loretta back with appreciation for the way the chapter attends closely to Loretta’s understanding of care work from the vantage point of her reflective practice, commenting that, “such practice wisdom is always under threat of being lost, because it is seldom lifted out of the conditions of its use.” I learned that the term originated in the field of social work (Samson, 2014; Tsang, 2008) but found it relates across fields of care work.

REFRAMING CARE WORK

I teach undergraduate students of education studies in a small liberal arts college. My students study multiple dimensions of the practice, impact, and support of teaching and learning—many of which I have written about in articles on the arts of relationship (Curl & Lesnick, 2017; Lesnick, 2009, 2010), facilitation (Cook-Sather & Lesnick, 2023; Lesnick et al., 2024), and

change (Lesnick & Cook-Sather, 2010; Cohen & Lesnick, 2013; Cohen et al., 2007)—within and beyond schools. My students also study to understand their own educational formation, coming to see how it has shaped them and how this process is one they can also shape (Lesnick, 2005).

Growing out of my early interest in how people talk about their work, this book explores the branch of work where education is found: care work for people's survival and thriving in situations of challenge and change. I use the term "care work" instead of "human services" or "helping professions" because those are too narrow, transactional, and deficit/savior-oriented. In contrast, the paths of care work practice we uplift in this book span a broad range of fields in which a practitioner works with people in furtherance of their well-being: education, social work, medicine, youth development, somatic healing, organizing, family care and history-keeping, and organizing.

Recognizing the need for paradigms of serving survival and thriving that move past reductive conceptions of "human services" and the "helping professions," this book advances a method of research, called practice dialogues, into care work through presence, dialogue, mutual listening, and collaborative writing. That is, the book amplifies the practice wisdom of care workers through dialogues and writing with them. My premise is that a proper understanding of practice wisdom depends on ways of learning from those who hold it and listening to them speak about it in their own terms. Co-authorship, then, is both medium and message. Care

work is a form of co-authorship, and so is this book. As Trinh T. Minh-Ha wrote in her film *Reassemblage* about the problem with ethnographic filmmaking that objectifies, distances, and demeans its subjects, “I do not intend to speak about; just speak nearby” (1982). Showing the interconnection of fields of care work, each chapter of the book grows from dialogue and writing with a practitioner, including a geriatric social worker, a Capoeira Mestre, a public school teacher and union organizer, an historian, a school principal, a physician, a massage therapist, a family caregiver and academic coach, a family historian, a community organizer, and a student of kinesiology and piano.

As feminist scholars over many decades (Benoit, 2011; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Bahn et al., 2020; Pan American Health Organization, 2021) have explicated, care work is often misunderstood as menial, while higher status fields often keep their dimensions of care hidden, as if it’s incidental to the real work:

The private sphere, where the daily and generational social reproduction of family and community members takes place, became a women’s sphere, and a site of non-economic, non-instrumental activities. Thus, over time, caring activities became to be seen less and less as economic and more and more as if they were not work at all (Folbre, 2001). The gendering of care work, that is, the bearing, raising, socialization, and education of children, the care for other dependents

in the population (disabled, sick, elderly) inside homes, and the care work that is done by volunteers in formal institutions such as schools and hospitals or in volunteer agencies and non-governmental organizations (Prentice & Ferguson, 2000), in effect has led to its devaluation. (Benoit & Hallgrimsdottir, 2011, 3-4)

The work of care is not generally coded as knowledge work, and care roles, educational preparation, and continuing education requirements notwithstanding, does not usually afford sufficient support (in terms of time, pay, or role definition) for speaking, writing, or doing research as part of the job. In addition to keeping these modes of professional renewal out of reach for care workers, this means that the wisdom of practice is often at risk of being lost.

Care workers, frequently overworked and underpaid, find themselves supporting others without enough support for themselves. They also contend with secondary trauma, for example:

Several practice-focused researchers suggest that all therapists, across practice orientations, are challenged when working with trauma-exposed clients (Bride, 2007; Figley, 1995, 2002; Owens, 2014). According to the American Psychiatric Association, trauma reactions are likely to occur in individuals who experience “repeated or extreme exposure to adverse details of traumatic events” (American Psychiatric Association,

2013, p. 271). Likewise, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) asserts professionals assisting trauma survivors are likely to experience emotional stress responses that include, memory problems, hyper-arousal reactions, avoidance behaviors, and re-experiencing personal trauma (National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2017). (Owens-King, 2019, 38–39)

This is heavily documented in the research literature, with a recent focus on the effect of secondary trauma on frontline care workers during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hansel & Saltzman, 2023; Owens-King, 2019; McMakin et al., 2023).

Because they often lack support or even acknowledgment of the difficulties they face in their work, many care workers also experience burnout (Smullens, 2015; Kober & Chang, 2024; Kurowski et al., 2015; Halbesleben, 2008). In fact, the first conversations surrounding the concept of burnout occurred related to care work:

Despite the fact that burnout occurs in myriad professions, and can often be seen in the personal lives of those whose work occurs within the home, it was first identified in the mental health professions due to the complex relationship between caregiver and client. (Oser, Biebel, Pullen, & Harp, 2013). . . According to Freudenberger, when we are burned out we become

increasingly “inoperative.” Maslach (1993) further defined burnout as having three chief components: (1) emotional exhaustion (inability to feel compassion for clients), (2) depersonalization (detachment from the emotional needs of their client), and (3) lack of a feeling of personal accomplishment (critical evaluation of oneself). In other words, burnout is a completely understandable human response to emotional and physical overload. (Smullens, 2015, p. 17)

Care workers confront these difficulties within systems that are biased, bureaucratic, resource-starved, and hierarchical, where recognition often comes only when people leave direct care roles. If a practitioner chooses to work outside such systems, uncertain livelihood and benefits make these types of careers hard to sustain.

Attending to the practice wisdom that emerges through care work, this book challenges hierarchies of labor that both discount and ignore the complexity and creativity of care, and that isolate rather than integrate areas of its practice. In taking an expansive view of care work, this project seeks to clarify its character both in instances where it is usually recognized (such as teaching and social work) and those where it is not (such as being an historian). In conversation with education studies, feminist epistemologies, and Black studies, this book recasts the traditional discourses of “helping” that reify the saviorism of service and, more fundamentally, the isolation of thought from action and reflection.

I hope this book will contribute to a growing dialogue (Bontemps-Hommen et al., 2020; Cameron, 2020; Sharman, 2021; Tsui et al., 2022; Riccaboni, 2022) about how to recognize, respect, and learn from people who sustain a path of care work, and to learn what has sustained and been sustained in them. I seek to give them an opportunity to share their wisdom when and as they wish it to be. The practitioners I write with here are people at various ages and stages along their trajectories. Some are young, some are senior in their fields, some are in the middle of it all. As we talk and write together, we draw together and amplify what they have learned. Care work is crucially about learning—doing it and fostering it. This means that it opens onto situations where people grapple with the unknown, and with conventional ways of confining it.

RESEARCH AS LISTENING: SITUATING MYSELF IN COMMUNITY-LED APPROACHES

Another way people confine the unknown is to codify and restrict modes of understanding it. This tendency lends support to the impersonal and impositional ways of knowing that characterize traditional academic work in the West. Academia set itself up as a voice to be heard (to “profess”), not an ear to hear. In co-creating this project, my priority has been to hear the work and voices of the practitioners I was honored to talk and write with. *Practice Dialogues* calls readers, including those within the academic community, to respect and learn

from care workers' wisdom as knowledge. We have sought to create a text that is both accessible and actually interesting to practitioners, not written for a narrow academic audience. There's an interesting tension here as I myself am an academic; I am publishing the book with an academic press (albeit one seeking to expand the form); I aim to read it with students in an academic context and encourage others to do likewise—as one among many settings where I hope it will be of use. What to make of this?

This project shares a root with academic study insofar as it concerns inquiry—a valuing of questions and what they bring forth—and as it concerns the valuing of knowledge as an ongoing process of discovery. In Bresler's words, “to converse is to inquire” (2006, p. 139). It's not that the book rejects academic inquiry; rather, it turns from academic formalism and disciplinary constriction, both of which can become dehumanizing, toward an already present, humanized wholeness. Black critical thought (Lyiscott et al., 2021; Grant et al., 2021) has long been clear on this point. In Justin Coles's words: “I am not waiting for your statistical analysis to value me or your ethnographic observations to see my humanity through *thick description*” (Lyiscott et al., 2021, p. 3).

This book comes from critiques of academia which find form both within and beyond it. In my experience as a young feminist—a white, Jewish, American, middle-class girl—in the 1970s and 1980s, the construct of kitchen table knowledge was a counterweight to academic norms built upon and to protect patriarchy. I can't remember when I first heard the term, but

I felt its power to validate women's knowledge rooted in contexts ignored and discounted by academia—dismissed as private, domestic, informal/messy, too practical, too grassroots. In Cynthia Dillard's words, "the kitchen table has been an enduring image in collective Black feminisms throughout the ages" (2021, p. 23). In college and graduate school, I read work published by Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press with deep respect, and came to understand the urgency to publish work by BIPOC writers, artists, and activists, as both traditional publishers and presses centered by white women's feminism had failed BIPOC women.

I was a teacher for many years before I became a college professor (almost 30 years ago). In the mid-1980s, when I started teaching, the field of education was starting to value teacher knowledge, to attend to the fact that expertise about how to conduct education was held by those doing the work in classrooms. I entered a PhD program in literacy studies and became a student of qualitative research methods. I focused on practitioner and community-based research because they challenge the ways in which academic study, because of its tradition of elitism, tends toward isolation from the contexts of its study.

Tuck (2009), Kovach (2021), and many other scholars researching Indigenous communities (Brown, 2015; Cohen, 2013; Markides & Forsythe, 2018) reimagine/restore research as a practice by, for, and with communities, arguing that every part of it—the researchers, methodology, findings, publications—should be a community-led and -owned process.

For many Indigenous peoples, the boundaries of their lands have been redrawn by colonial powers and they have found themselves confined or shifted to territories not of their own choosing. Other Indigenous peoples have remained on their lands and have only just recently been confronted by forces that challenge their guardianship of their traditional territories. Still others have never had legally recognized land to call their own. In many ways, the journeys of the Indigenous researchers reveal struggles over territory that are similar to how Indigenous peoples have been positioned in relation to their lands. Indigenous researchers' stories provide increased understanding of how they caretake and illuminate the territory of Indigenous knowledge. (Cram et al., 2016, p. 11).

I studied the work of like-minded people (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Fine, 1991) who were pushing against research traditions that spoke for or down to others, including teachers, who are often given recommendations that do not reflect what they—we—know of teaching and learning, of young people, of communities and organizations, of life.

Listening to care workers is essential to valuing their practice, which no human being survives without. While much is against this essential recognition, a deep lineage informs, inspires, and nurtures it.

CHAPTER THREE



PRACTICE DIALOGUES

Methods and Methodology

Alice Lesnick and Kira Wu-Hacohen

In this chapter, I (Alice) describe how the dialogues, grown into chapters, were created, and discuss the reasons behind the process. In other words, I share both the methods—how-to—and the methodology—why. I hope it will inform readers wishing to see behind the scenes as well as those wishing to engage the process themselves. I offer these notes not as a blueprint but as a series of what my

friend Paul Grobstein called “take-off points.” I invite readers to improvise with the process and let us know what you learn.

I hope that our readers will engage in practice dialogue to uplift the wisdom of practice when inspired to do so. In fact, the very work of researching and writing this chapter inspired a dialogue with Kira Wu-Hacohen that became the chapter conclusion. As in this case, the practice dialogue process is designed to be accessible—not a highly technical, rarified style of research (Appadurai, 2006) but rather a way of learning that threads through human life—on a walk, at the kitchen table, or during a long phone call. In portraying this approach as accessible and natural, I also want to affirm that the skills involved grow with practice.

INVITING A DIALOGUE

After the initial conversation with Loretta Dugan that inspired the project, I thought about people I know who I sensed have taken a wisdom path in care work. As the individual chapters make clear, I knew some of the co-authors well at the start, and some I had not worked or spoken closely with.

Since most people don’t usually talk about themselves in these terms, and since I wanted to signal that the process of learning through dialogue was open-ended, I kept the invitation light and sent an email like this:

Dear Carla,

One of my sabbatical projects this year is to learn from individuals who have taken an enduring path devoted to people's growth in situations of challenge and change. I think of your work in education this way, as a wisdom path of sustaining struggle, joy, and possibility.

Might you be interested in meeting (in person or Zoom) for a conversation on this topic? It could lead to something written, as well—not heavy here, but a way of sharing the wisdom. Thanks for considering! If this is at all of interest, I can fill you in more when we talk.

*All best,
Alice*

Being both clear and open about time was crucial to keeping the process from becoming transactional. It also allowed the care workers whose words form the basis of the process to set the pace, in a way suited to their work and lives. Paradoxically, in order to respect people's time, I had to be clear about the time I was asking for, as well as its possible open-endedness. It was important not to assume how long the process would last. Some of the chapters here were

written within three weeks; others emerged over many months. I needed to trust the process and the people. In two cases, following initial dialogues and some writing, individuals decided not to pursue the project. I had to release what I had hoped the possible outcome could be. Releasing haste and pressure changed how I could respond.

If the person said yes (all but two I asked did), I invited them to a get-together, with in-person and Zoom options. When in person, we met where the person suggested: cafés and restaurants, in homes, and on walks.

For the initial conversation, 60 to 75 minutes worked well. After a bit of small talk, I would introduce the project again and ask my conversation partner if they were interested in participating. I stressed that we would co-create the conversation and its eventual written form, should that come about, and that it would be finished when we both thought it was true and beautiful. I emphasized that they could decide not to continue at any time. I would say that I was not recording or taking notes, but rather trusting memory and the ongoing connection to bring forward what was needed. This is another reason to keep each conversation time-limited!

My goal was to move at the speed of conversation with deep attention. I would thank my conversation partner for their time and briefly reiterate what I'd written in the email. I then asked how they had continued in their work. I didn't carry an expectation of what would come next. I encouraged people to share using active listening and follow-up observations and questions. Since my goal was to create a dialogue

whose meaning would emerge in real time, I did not follow a script or template or hold back from sharing my thoughts.

During the conversation, I settled back and listened receptively, without strain, endeavoring to be present and free of the tendency to anticipate, while also deeply engaged. I had to trust my mind and heart to hold what would be needed and remember that there would be time to come back to it. I did not record the conversations and did not take notes until afterward (except occasionally when I couldn't help myself). I wanted to respond within the dynamics of the conversation, not reference a time beyond it. I wanted to listen with presence and whatever natural acuteness I could bring.

In moving at the speed of conversation, I sought to dethrone the anxiety of having to “get”—document and understand, and also take—everything all at once, or at all. During one of my conversations with Kamau Blakney (Chapter 5), we spoke about this. Kamau observed, “Why have to get everything? It's so much out here.” A turn toward abundance, I am coming to understand, is itself a turn toward trust: trust that the limit of what I am ready to work with—what my memory will hold onto—is enough to start, trust that my conversation partner will be there to work with me, and trust that taking the weight of what is shared between people is itself worthy of value.

I am learning, in real time as I write this, that the capacity to trust the present moment to serve and create the future is in fact no small part of practice wisdom. It is also a turn away from learning as production, and the implications

that education in a capitalist society necessitates material production rather than a creative process of learning (Kira Wu-Hacohen, email message to author, January 17, 2023). Disarming a habitual fear that time is scarce and not easy to share, I hope to walk the talk. A true process of co-creation involves honoring my espoused commitment to abundance of time, trust, and connection.

Kamau told me that when a student comes to one of his classes without showing an honest desire to be there, he makes sure to teach that day in a manner that ensures that only what can come safely, with respect for the tradition, will come into circulation. “Lineage matters,” Kamau said, not only the people right there in the room. What is written here is what honest conversation allowed and what wise people considered it well to put into circulation.

BEGINNING TO WRITE

I promised each dialogue partner that I would send a reflection on our conversation within a week’s time. Making this promise, and making space in the week to write an initial reflection to send to the person, were intuitive ways I found to bear witness to the gift I felt they had given me. I wanted to honor this gift—of trust, of sharing—with an answering commitment of time, attention, and work.

I would end the conversation with thanks and a roadmap for what I would do next: send an initial reflection within a

week's time, and ask what follow-up/next step the conversation partner wanted. My sense was that most people did not have firm expectations for the process and were happy to co-construct these.

You will notice that the initial meeting includes tacit and explicit commitments, related to its being a kind of ritual. (This idea is discussed in Chapter 1.) I promised to send a written reflection by a certain time to honor my dialogue partner's confidence and to keep the connection lively between us. This promise also held me to keeping the writing a priority no matter what else I was balancing that week. This in turn helped me to lift up what the ladle would hold, shifting from perfectionism to a more organic process.

Directly following the dialogue, I would make notes, including key words and phrases as well as the stories and themes I hoped to highlight in my first written reflection. Once in a while when a conversation was taking place on Zoom, I would write down a single word now and then, mainly because it linked to something so interesting that it would be less distracting to write it down.

To write the initial reflection, I opened a Google doc and added my notes, filling them in associatively, holding space within myself for the conversation and its resonance. In a spirit of calm allowing, I would remind myself that this first reflection could hold both flowers and seedlings. I paid particular attention to the imagery my conversation partner used, as well as their accented themes and stories. I tried to be true to their meaning in their terms and also to

amplify how they talked about their work. In other words, I listened *to* them, and also *for* their meaning conveyed musically—by their choice of words, tempo, emphasis, beat, and style.

As I shaped and ordered sentences and paragraphs, I would intersperse remembered and lightly reconstructed dialogue, opening as well to what the process brought back to mind. The process felt like lifting and shaping, like clay on a potter's wheel, rather than writing successive drafts. A few tips I can offer include these:

- I would envision an audience for the piece that encompassed both the person I'd spoken with and other people with shared interests.
- I would keep alert for imagery that seemed important to the person, or that crystallized aspects of what they shared.
- Using a Google doc invited writing that is immediate, in process, and so easy to change! The commenting and editing features also provided convenient ways to indicate to my co-writer places where I already had questions for them so I could very explicitly invite them to join in the writing. The fact that Google preserves the history of every given document, all of the versions, freed me not to worry about losing something.

I spent 2–3 hours (not always continuous) on these first writings.

I see now, following Carla Glover's wisdom in Chapter 7, that the method I followed included saying no. As Carla notes, commitment encompasses both refusal and affirmation. In addition to not recording, I said no to the paradigm of an interview. I did not create questions ahead of time, and I did not try to ask different people the same questions. As the initiator of a conversation, I posed questions when they were needed to aid the flow, but I tried to compose them out of the material of the conversation. While I expected people would tell me things they knew and I didn't, I also listened to elucidate unspoken, perhaps emergent, connections.

To work in this way, I had to break with some of my training as an academic. This proved both hard and easy. The hard part—a kind of haunt around legitimacy whereby repeatedly I had to give myself permission to follow intuition—showed me how deeply I had been conditioned. The easy part—that people I greatly admire responded with enthusiasm to the approach—showed me how ready we are to live and learn otherwise, and reminded me that we already do.

I stopped writing when I felt I had something it would feel good to share with my interlocutor. At that point, I emailed the writing to the practitioner, inviting them to respond, comment, or be in touch. Here is an example of one such message I sent:

Greetings! It was such a joy to talk with you last week.
Thank you for meeting and sharing your path.

After we met, I took some notes on our conversation, and over the course of the week drafted a reflection I share with you here.

In sharing this, I share my joy in listening to your practice wisdom. As a text, there is nothing here that I would not be happy for you to change!! We could also start in an entirely different place. I offer this as, well, an offering, and a first draft if that works for you, but I'm open to any way you wish to take this. I hope that seeing one version gives you a sense of one direction it could take, but definitely one of many.

I welcome your thoughts. Please feel free to write directly onto/into the document if you like! Or if you'd prefer to meet again (phone or Zoom also options) and go forward that way, also great with me!

With gladness and gratitude,
Alice

RESPONSE, REVISION, CONTINUING THE DIALOGUE

After I emailed the reflection, sometimes my dialogue partner would start writing into the document, offering additions, corrections, and comments in the margins. Sometimes they

would email me back a more global comment. In any case, eventually we would meet again, and continue the conversation. Most of the time, this felt more like picking up the first spoken conversation than working on a piece of writing. At first, I was surprised by this, I think because I am so used to working on writing with students. But I came to appreciate it because it kept the process fresh and spirited. I would add elements of these subsequent conversations to the written reflection, and continue to incorporate whatever my co-writer added. The finished versions use italics to convey the voice of each practitioner co-writer. It is important for readers to understand that the material not in italics, while written about them in the third person, was also sometimes written by and always shaped by them. We have found this blend of voicings to aid in the composition and sharing of the dialogues.

Each chapter developed through this collaboration in spoken and written dialogue, reflection, and revision. The writing and speaking held equal value as necessary elements of the conversation, and the conversation partners held equal authority in determining whether it was ready to be shared.

At a certain point, I would ask my thought partner whether they felt the piece was ready to share. Mostly by this time, they said yes, or they took the time they needed to revise. Then the chapter went into the working draft of the manuscript as a whole, with its first audience being other co-writers and whoever else the individual chose to share it with.

Some have asked why, in this age of podcasts and videos, we chose writing as the medium with which to convey this

music. I was inspired by interpretive traditions of textual encounter—midrash (spiritual and literary) as well as literary critical training—to offer the written word not as the last word, but as an invitation to make meaning through an ongoing and recursive, shared process (Lesnick & Cook-Sather, 2010; Handelman, 2011; Vilardi, 2009).

Each co-created chapter is a kind of duet that can be read independently or in harmony with the whole. This approach shares in “the musicality of storytelling” and the character of musical improvisation: “fluid, unpredictable, and unplanned” (Kira Wu-Hacohen, email to author, January 17, 2023; Bresler, 2006).

RESEARCH LINEAGES: NARRATIVE INQUIRY

I invited a current student in our department, Kira Wu-Hacohen, to think with me about the research lineages that underlie this methodology. An Anthropology and Education double major, Kira shared that a course she completed recently had led her to recognize the extractive quality of traditional ethnographic research, leaving her in search of more humanizing, community-led, and informal methods of research. Our shared interest in such methods led me to share this manuscript with her, which led to a written dialogue between us. Rather than absorb Kira’s language into this text, I am sharing it as she wrote it as a way to honor the impulse of dialogue as it carried through this project, and also to keep its practice in view as the basis for much understanding.

As one way to situate the practice dialogues project, Kira started with a consideration of research centering narrative, storytelling:

Kira: Though not the first to carry out this type of research, I believe Connelly and Clandinin (1990) were the first to use the term “narrative inquiry” to describe collaborative research centered around storytelling and experience. Their research framework is a broad methodology that focuses on “mutual storytelling and restorying”—the changing nature of stories of past experiences as we reflect on them from the present day and their meanings shifts. Narrative inquiry has produced many different forms of research—from auto/biographical writing to interviewing—where the roles of researcher and practitioner become less important than the trust, friendship, and reciprocity between collaborators.

Alice: This observation amplifies an aspect of the Practice Dialogues project, which positions participants as conversation partners and co-writers. The concept of “restorying” gets at the layered, over-time, and recursive processes of dialogue, writing, and revision that gave rise to the dialogue chapters in the book.

Kira: Yes! In each chapter, your voice and that of the practitioner in conversation are woven together

and “restoried” to become a fluid narrative. Narrative inquiry echoes a lot of your chosen methodology, particularly in how the process of collaborative writing, in addition to the stories shared, becomes knowledge to draw from. The essays in the book are derived from both the story and the process of crafting a narrative, a hybrid made up of the words and experiences of the practitioner as well as moments of “restorying,” re-narrating, and restructuring throughout the conversations and collaborative writing process.

Alice: And of course, to learn this way is not a bloodless, impersonal process; it’s one based in mutual attention and engagement.

Kira: Right. In Bresler’s (2006) terms, narrative inquiry does not just concern a text to analyze, but a story to respond to because it involves a real person behind the narrative. Because there is a person behind the narrative, listeners connect to the narrative as people, with our own intersubjectivity. This means a central outcome of the narrative inquiry process should be a change in oneself that comes from encountering the narrative of another.

Alice: I try to signal these changes, this impact, in the texts when I call attention to my own learning as I talk with the co-writers. Showing some of

my thoughts in the text is a way to signal that the process of response, in me as a listener, leads to new understandings that show up in the chapters.

Kira: And like you, your interlocutors also use the writing process—the process of finding, and choosing, and reviewing the words—to clarify what they really want to share. Sondra Perl (1980) writes about the backward movement of writing. She calls this “retrospective structuring,” in which the writer looks back at what they have written and continues structuring it. This process includes the writer asking themselves “Are these words right for me?” and “What’s missing?” in order to rewrite and restructure until the writing “feels” right. Perl observes that people who accept writing as a recursive process full of retrospective structuring, rather than a linear one, have an easier time with “waiting, looking, and discovering” (368). In this book, practitioners take on a role not usually granted to them: a writer. They rewrite and re-narrate their and others’ words, making space for new clarity and insights.

Alice: Yes! One of my main goals in the project is that through it, the practitioners become writers of their wisdom path.

CHAPTER FOUR



PROBLEM-WRESTLING

Loretta Dugan and Alice Lesnick

The world is not comprehensible, but it is embraceable:
through the embracing of one of its beings.

Martin Buber

On a walk one day, my friend Loretta Dugan was reflecting on her career in geriatric social work. *To be of use*, Loretta said, *I had to learn to wrestle a problem down*. It struck me that she didn't say solve or resolve, diagnose or iron out, but wrestle. And not just wrestle, but wrestle *down*. I was captivated by this metaphor for approaching a problem. I wanted to know more.

Loretta is a longtime practitioner richly possessed of seasoned humility (a term I learned from her). When someone speaks directly from the core of knowledge ripened by experience, it is important to listen—to their words, yes, but also for their metaphors, their style. Because the knowledge borne of practice is not always expressed or even recognized, it's a gift when shared. Walking alongside Loretta as she prepared for her retirement, I was inspired to consider what I and many others have to learn from people who have taken a wisdom path in working with people in situations of challenge and change.

So I want to consider: what is problem-wrestling? And what does it mean to wrestle a problem down? In wrestling, we come into close contact, skin-to-skin, under pressure. To wrestle a problem down, then, must entail struggle, a personal engagement carrying challenge, even risk to oneself, an endeavor without a predictable or secure outcome. I wonder how broadly the work of problem-wrestling that Loretta identified as central to social work might apply. . .to teaching? Practicing medicine? Parenting? Organizational leadership? Loretta's and my conversations, spoken and written, have inspired me to bring others into the dialogue to share what they have learned in commitment to doing work dedicated to other people's thriving.

Listening to Loretta, I sensed that she found "problem-wrestling" not just difficult, but also energizing and centering. I asked her to say more: *I had to do that to get my arms around the problem*. Response, then, could take the form of an embrace, a kind of encompassing, even of intimacy.

I asked Loretta if she had learned this approach in social work school. On our next walk, she told me she'd discussed the question with her husband, also a social worker, and that they didn't remember it from the formal curriculum. They were, they recalled, taught to "partialize" a problem. How different is the language of partializing a problem compared with wrestling one down! As Loretta describes it, problem-wrestling is essentially holistic. Practitioners clarify possible action not by fragmenting or compartmentalizing a problem, but by "getting their arms around" it. To wrestle it *down* suggests a kind of contending that allows for needed movement, but not a breaking apart of a problem into pieces. Problem-wrestling is a holistic form of analysis.

What gave Loretta the strength to approach her work this way was the sense that she was not alone. Over time, she explained, she created a network of expert, often more experienced collaborators she could turn to. When she did turn to them, even with a very knotty problem, she knew, as she said, that she *wouldn't have to go up and down the wall first with them* before getting to the matter at hand. With this imagery, I could grasp how important it was to Loretta to have thought partners who could join her immediately at the center of the problem in question, not require her first to frame it out, or to stabilize them in receiving it. As someone interested in collaboration, I caught a sense of the qualities of thought partnership especially valuable to the demands of her path.

I love listening to Loretta talk about her work and its context: a large city and increasingly resource-starved urban

hospital, caring for elderly people in difficult circumstances. She speaks of the relational nature of her work, of course, including meeting people in their homes, talking with their children, and linking them with additional resources and support. Of course, this sounds smoother than it is when all of the bureaucracy, know-how, and logistics are taken into account. Loretta made home visits through the pre-vaccine phase of the pandemic, and moved a support group she led for Alzheimer's caregivers online. During all of this, her knowledge of what purposeful and useful action can look like sustained her, and many others.

My field is education, another area in which practice can be incessantly demanding and under-recognized, as well as deeply personal and meaningful. Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator whose approach to teaching adult literacy inspired so many, made an important distinction between problem-solving and what he called "problem-posing" (Freire, 1970, p. 79). Being oriented exclusively to problem-solving, he argued, could limit a practitioner's imagination to conventional problems, the problem with this being that convention often favors the powerful. With problem-posing, Freire encouraged us to take our freedom in defining the problem. In this way, he taught people to value questions as ways to intervene in harmful structures, and to see and show others how they can change. To problem-solving and problem-posing, we now add problem-wrestling. The concept of problem-wrestling acknowledges the struggle that those involved with both problem-solving and

problem-posing enter and experience in the course of doing this work.

I shared the foregoing reflection with Loretta, and our spoken conversation grew to include a written one, which follows.

Loretta: As I watched a jazz concert the other evening, I thought about the collaboration of musicians. It is done in public and there seemed to be an energy that inspired and renewed them while they were doing their work. “Problem-wrestling” calls for an energy on the part of the practitioner. People can sense it and they can sense an interest in them. When I used the description, I was thinking of my evolution of becoming comfortable with small, realistic goals. I needed to be able to try to grasp the depth and complexity of the situation (putting my arms around it) and boil things down to small steps that could move things in a better direction. I would always be on the lookout for a hand reaching out to me as I extended mine. Being rebuffed or met with indifference comes with the territory. Also, coming to a point in my professional development of being able to admit all that I do not know provided an inner freedom. I would begin my inquiry with “Please educate me.” The renewal came in the collaboration. I knew firsthand how

busy the nurse practitioners, physicians, attorneys, paralegals and other social workers were and how precious their time is. There were so many in-service programs given at the hospital where the message was, “We need to get out of our silos.” I took this to heart and began to recognize that other professionals sometimes relished good questions and mostly were happy to share their expertise.

I took the opportunity to arrange educational lectures with various specialists for the Fellows in geriatric medicine. This was key in being known and in getting a response. When I read about the dire straits of the child welfare system, I think of young, inexperienced workers going out to investigate or make assessments on their own and then being blamed for failures. I wonder whether they have sufficient support or the capability of arranging for a medical or psychological evaluation at home. I bring this up because I reflect on the fact that a sense of powerlessness, defeat and ‘going through the motions’ can set in so easily when facing what feel like insurmountable problems. I had recently read of an exchange between a young, public school teacher talking to a seasoned experienced one, saying, “Nothing I do matters.” The younger teacher was set straight

with the older teacher saying, “In the lives of the children everything matters.”

Alice: To me, this exchange highlights that “putting out fires”—another metaphorical way people talk about this challenging work—while necessary, stops short of raising the energy of response to individuals’ needs and desires. So, yes, it is necessary at times, but not sufficient.

Growing out of our conversation, a question I have for you now, Loretta, is this: How did you learn to reconcile the depth and complexity of situations, the need for small steps to move in a better direction, and your own commitment to social justice? In other words, how do seasoned practitioners learn to accept the value of small steps as part of meeting their big goals, not as compromising them (e.g., Solnit, 2006; Welch, 1990)?

At your suggestion, I am reading Nancy McWilliams’s wonderful book, *Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy* (2004). I appreciate gaining a glimpse of a text, and a thinker, whose work has informed yours. In the first chapter, McWilliams discussed what she considers the elements of the approach, which she says can span a range of talk therapy (not exclusively psychoanalytic), defining one of the key elements as faith. She writes:

I am using the term advisedly, asking even those readers with no affinity for the spiritual to consider that there is a kind of leap of faith we invite our patients

to make, and a kind of keeping the faith that we as analytic therapists ordinarily demonstrate to them. What I mean by faith is a gut-level confidence in a process, despite inevitable moments of skepticism, confusion, doubt, and even despair. . . . [Analysts] are loath to make predictions about just where the professional journey with any individual will go, but they trust it to take the therapist and the patient into areas that will ultimately strengthen the client's sense of honesty, agency, mastery, self-cohesion, self-esteem, affect tolerance, and capacity for fulfilling relationships. . . . Very often, the kind of change that the client originally envisioned is not the kind that occurs, only because what does occur is something the client could not have initially imagined. To move into areas that are emotionally new, the client must proceed on a kind of borrowed faith. If the practitioner proceeds with integrity, the client will eventually feel trust in the therapist as a person; the therapist, meanwhile, exemplifies faith in the client, the partnership, and the process. (McWilliams, 2004, pp. 42-43)

As I read McWilliams describe the faith at the core of a successful therapeutic relationship, I think of how you would “get your arms around” a problem and wrestle it down. Now I notice the faith necessary to engage in this wrestling—without certainty of outcome. And I see how building the trust McWilliams describes is essential to the way practitioner

and client work together to enable healing. People sustain this trust not because they are certain of outcomes and how to get there, but because they are grounded by being connected—with each other, with people supporting them, as you describe your network, and with the energy of the process itself.

Loretta: It dawned on me that the back-and-forth dialogue about “everything matters” was from a recent book I read, *Raising Lazarus* by Beth Macy. She writes movingly about people who are on the front lines in facing the opioid crisis.

The tension of balancing working with individuals and families while recognizing the larger social justice issues is an ongoing one. There are many aspects of the aging system that are unfair and unjust. The most pressing issue is that people who worked hard and receive a decent social security income and possibly a pension are over the income limits for any help. Being able to present accurate and sometimes disappointing information without feeling responsible is a learned skill.

This question also asks, “Am I doing enough?” By nature, I am an introvert and am drawn to the clinical aspect of the work. I would always ask myself, “Can I be of service to the person in front of me?” This is where being able to go to those other professionals I respect to get

questions answered and issues clarified helped tremendously. I would try to parse out whether something could be done or not. At Bryn Mawr School of Social Work, the notion that each encounter is a clinical one was an undergirding theory. In other words, therapeutic work is not just done in the office of a psychotherapist. My idea of what was therapeutic broadened greatly over the years. I came to believe that showing up with a sincere effort to understand and possibly be of service could be a therapeutic encounter. I had started out my social work career in child welfare and had unrealistic (grandiose) expectations. It took many years and availing myself of therapy to come to a sense of satisfaction with small steps. Reading books like the one you mention by Nancy McWilliams helped me gain perspective of the time that therapeutic work takes and of the incremental steps involved. In geriatrics, patients are dealing with chronic illnesses. There is not an illusion of curing but instead the work is to develop a partnership to help a patient take the best care of themselves possible. I think another aspect for me was to be able to accept the rebuffs, anger and occasional hostility and not perceive these as a testament to my lack of skill.

Finding a place to work where there was not just lip service to “mission and values” but instead there were talented, hard-working human beings who “walked the walk” was valuable. In many ways, I borrowed the attitudes of these seasoned clinicians until they became part of my professional repertoire. I needed to learn to turn down my reactivity when there were challenging/unpleasant encounters. Two people in particular had a great impact on me. On home visits, I could watch a particular physician and nurse practitioner deal with really challenging patients. Sometimes we visited patients who were hoarders, had bedbugs, maggots in a wound or tremendous anger. Their calm, respectful demeanor added a sense of peace in a chaotic situation. Patients usually settled down and responded to their calm, direct approach. I also needed to turn down my negative reactions toward managers, administrators, i.e., ‘those in charge’ when I thought they were not doing a good job. It took watching my husband wrestle with the enormous challenge of being in a leadership position for me to examine my critical reactions and judgments. I gained an appreciation for competing demands and being able to recognize others’ skill sets.

In terms of social justice advocacy, I had opportunities to provide real life scenarios of people in very difficult situations to colleagues who had voices in Harrisburg and were trying to work on social justice issues. This helped reduce the sense that I should be taking on larger issues. It was a tremendous advantage that I had both a secure income from a health care organization and an ability to develop my practice autonomously. Overall, I learned to take less for granted, be less critical and have more mercy on those in charge and on difficult people I encountered in my work.

If there was one overarching goal in my work it would be that patients and their caregivers desperately wanted to be able to “age in place.” Sometimes, what seemed like a small problem to wrestle—like a broken hospital bed—proved to be thorny. Medicare won’t cover repairs for medical equipment after a 13 month rental period. This is where the grind of poverty would surface, as repair costs would be more than a person could afford. Allowing a frail, elderly bedbound patient to remain in a broken hospital bed was untenable. My visits would often reveal a capable caregiver who was exhausted. Other times, the designated caregiver was not

capable but might be financially dependent and have no other housing option.

The day I spoke of “problem-wrestling,” I was picturing a feisty 96-year-old blind patient who had always been in charge. Her son, who was somewhat limited, was providing care as she had become bedbound. He had no other living option and chafed at the sound of his name being called almost constantly. When I spoke of needing to “wrap my arms around” the unique situation, I’d be looking at their home to get a sense of whether they were keeping their heads above water. I’d get a feel for the dynamics or emotional climate. Because all of our patients had chronic illness, I’d try to ascertain their level of function/ability to manage independently. As our Chief of Geriatrics commented, the difference between being bedbound and being able to transfer into a wheelchair independently is enormous. Sometimes, a referral to a home care physical therapist could make all the difference in the world. With our blind patient, in my younger days, I might have tried to work on her relationship with her son. Instead, I listened carefully and at the same time, I tried to figure out what might alleviate their significant distress. Would there be a way to get some help

for our patient and free up the son from her unrelenting demands?

This is where the embrace of the whole complex picture would come in. Because I knew what it would take to walk down the path of applying for services (if they were in agreement) and the “problem-wrestling” would begin. In cases like these, people are often terrified of estate recovery. This means the state can collect on monies paid out for long-term care once a person dies. This patient’s modest home was her asset, her estate. She wanted to leave the home to her son and was immediately cautious. Arranging to get legal help and trusted expert advice from Community Legal Services about a hardship waiver was the first step in a long process. Since extensive financial information was needed (cash value of life insurance policies and five years of bank statements) I knew I would have to see if a family member might assist. This responsible woman had taken out six life insurance policies on people she loved as she wanted to have enough to bury them. Again, I needed Community Legal Services to talk with her about cashing in some of these policies to become financially eligible for services. She knew she needed more help and yet her powerful feelings of being more concerned and

protective of others were a hindrance. There were times in the process when she decided against the whole idea. She eventually would be back in touch. Many low income elderly patients who desperately need help decide against applying for Medicaid-covered services.

Alice quoted Nancy McWilliams describing therapy patients taking a “leap of faith.” In my work, I knew the destination and it would take considerable trust on the part of the patient to walk with me through the maze of applications for various benefits and sometimes through the health care system. The team I worked with built up a wealth of experience and knowledge about interventions that worked for our patients. We relied on each other to brainstorm in informal ways. Matching a bedbound, morbidly obese patient with the right therapist who might help him practice sitting on the side of the bed would have a big impact. Knowing that a referral to Older Adult Protective Services could possibly result in a struggling patient receiving services immediately helped with a feeling of having tools in one’s tool kit. Because I had not had that level of collaboration in previous positions, I knew to appreciate it. It was important to me to feel I was doing important, meaningful work and to have that reflected

back by my peers. One of the Community Legal Services lawyers once commented that his work is similar to tax lawyers for the wealthy, only his expertise is Medicaid law and in finding ways to help poor people become eligible. Working alongside smart, talented dedicated professionals would inspire me and helped to renew me along the way. Also, seeing the way many patients and their caregivers coped with tremendous burden or the vagaries of fate both humbled and inspired me.

I asked Loretta what, based on her experiences, she sees as generative questions for practitioners to ask ourselves. She responded:

What do I need to learn to do my job well?

How do I find renewal?

Are there ways I can notice the efforts this person is making (even when they do not seem to be doing a great job?)

CHAPTER FIVE



A FORMULA FOR LIMITLESSNESS

Kamau Blakney and Alice Lesnick

At a café on Fairmount Avenue, Kamau Blakney and I meet to talk about the path he takes beyond himself as a Capoeira Angola Mestre and community educator.

I ask him about the trust he sustains in and on this path and also how they—path and trust—sustain him. I am thinking, I say, of *sustaining* both in the sense of support and perhaps also in the sense of something befalling someone, as when we speak of sustaining an injury. Yes, Kamau smiles, *yes, that's me.*

As a Capoeira Mestre, Kamau has led FICA Philadelphia, a chapter of the Fundação Internacional de Capoeira Angola (International Capoeira Angola Foundation), since the early 2000s. He co-founded the Philadelphia chapter in 1998. While Kamau has trained in Capoeira since his early 20s, he is clear to say that the path he took started before that.

I first got to meet Kamau several years ago when my friend Margo Schall, a longtime member of FICA Philadelphia, introduced me during a period when she and I were meeting to share our experiences with somatic learning, and in particular martial arts. Margo had invited me to join for a class in the recreation center where the group trains. I went one Saturday afternoon, nervous and happy to come through the door. I found a group ranging in age from about 8 to 55 (that was me), including families. In the room joy threaded through deep purpose and acknowledged commitment. The movement training built quickly from a warm-up to floor work that called forth all I could summon on the spot. Sometimes we worked with a partner; my partner was a young person of about 12, who held my eye as I found my feet. I could feel why people speak of *playing* Capoeira—play that makes demands and creates knowledge, together with solidarity. Play that carries people, and that people carry, where changes are made and modeled, and where hard ground and maximal engagement are expected.

Following the movement training, class shifted to music and song. Margo led the singing, each capoeirista playing an

instrument fashioned within the community. I was given one to play, and was grateful with it and my voice to join where I could.

Later that year, I started working with Kamau as he became one of the co-educators in a course Margo and I teach. As a co-educator, Kamau shares in creating the course syllabus and serves as one of the course mentors, hosting undergraduate education students in an introduction to Capoeira, and guiding them to come into this specific community of practice. Just as I was given, Kamau gives students access to Capoeira through direct experience and invites them to consider what this powerful tradition has laid out as the process of education. Kamau also joins with the other class co-educators in class meetings on our campus, where he shares insights from his journey as an educator, beginning with his years as a teacher of young people with special needs in a large city district.

In response to my question about sustaining trust in and along his path, Kamau affirms: *Yes, I have come into wealth along this path—wealth of connection, wealth of knowledge, wealth of lineage—and also debt in many senses.*

I started training Capoeira in Philadelphia, together with several people who worked with our teacher. And I've seen many go. I stayed but many haven't. The time came for us to teach because we stood to carry it forward. Teaching Capoeira isn't a job for me, it's a path—though once in a while it's a job, too.

Kamau has just returned from Atlanta with his family from a homecoming visit to his alma mater, Morehouse College, and he speaks of how freeing it was for him to live in Atlanta.

Between wealth and debt, path and job, freedom and fight, Kamau's work extends through polarities/contradictions, neither defined nor confined by them. *It's important to me, Kamau observes during our conversation, to remember that what we can imagine is limitless. I shape my thinking and action to limitlessness.*

I remember a poem I read recently, by the 17th-century poet and samurai Mizuta Masahide:

*Barn's burnt down –
Now
I can see the moon.*

Yes, Kamau smiles. *Yes, there can be structures in our way, and they don't have to be. In every situation there is a way to align with your greatest good. Always. Just as there is a formula—yes, a formula!—for responding to challenge in ways that keep life strong and open rather than shutting it down.*

A formula for limitlessness. My mind opens in joy at this serious word play. We take the language of math and algorithms with us into the conversation, as I wonder if this is the basis of Kamau's path.

When I attended class at FICA in 2019, my eyes were drawn to the lush, green and arching plants growing in the

space, nourished by fish and other nutrient-providing additions to their water-based environment. Kamau and the FICA community had established this hydroponic growing system to produce food and healthful vegetation, and to extend the power of this approach to sufficiency and self-determination that conserves water and other resources while sustaining people with nutritious food.

COVID closed the rec center for almost two years. Now the plants are back; hopefully fish soon. Kamau adds: *It was hard losing the fish and the original plants. But now the system is growing again.*

Early in the pandemic, Kamau shared, he experienced health challenges—not COVID, but other issues: *I needed to move out of a panic modality into a learning one, and the typical medical model was not offering anything I could use. I connected with an app that led me to a live, online space led by a group of sisters, Black women, focused on health coaching and healing. I confronted core aspects of what it had meant for me to be a Black man by changing the prohibitions I had experienced on expressing emotion, asking for help, and feeling vulnerable. I kept coming back to this online community, often daily, while walking. It was a new way to move and to move through.*

In a sense, it was a barn burning, opening to light. We spoke about how much energy people put into maintaining structures that don't serve, and how much is released when they burn down. I commented that burning something down releases great energy that can be used differently—"but," I speculated, "first it has to be captured and re-formed in order

to be useful.” I think I said this because I didn’t want to seem naive about the costs of change. Kamau took a moment.

Does it? Kamau asked. I was quiet. No, it can just be; the energy can remain open and available, not confined. Not owned. We can just leave it in abundance.

I realized with gratitude that Kamau was teaching me in real time how the formula for limitlessness works. A limiting way of thinking changes by its light.

CHAPTER SIX



POWERS OF ATTENTION

To Walk a Fine Line

Steve Volk and Alice Lesnick

The first time I met Steve Volk, I felt the power of his attention. The circumstance was an external review of a program I lead at work. Steve was one of a three-person team formed to assess the program and recommend future steps for improvement. It meant a lot to me to find someone in this role whose manner of listening—imaginative, unhurried, and seemingly unencumbered by the drive to prove his expertise—made the review process much more than an administrative exercise.

Flowing through Steve's listening, I sensed the joy of learning. As a reader of his blog [<https://steven-volk.blog/>] long before ever meeting him in person, I had felt this same energy, even when, as usually is the case, he was writing about difficult and painful things. I wanted to learn how Steve came to attend as he does and its place in his path. I asked if he would talk with me about what he has given his attention to, how it has been sustained, in him and in the world, and how it has drawn him forward. Luckily, he agreed.

Steve is now an emeritus history professor at Oberlin College and a leader in the field of teaching and learning on college campuses. His areas of scholarly attention include Latin American history in two fields: 20th century Chilean history, specifically the Allende government, the Pinochet dictatorship, and questions of historical memory, and the US–Mexico border and immigration. He also carries out an active research agenda on issues of higher education pedagogy, both in the field of history and in terms of museum education.

Given Steve's interests in education and in the history of authoritarianism, I began by asking him if he would talk about their interconnection. Our conversation quickly taught me to recognize a better starting place, i.e., with his own teaching. First, though, it was important for me to learn that before becoming an academic, Steve led NACLA, the North American Congress on Latin America, working in Chile and New York for many years. During the Pinochet dictatorship (1973–1990), Steve was an active participant in the Chile

solidarity movement, joining with others to document human rights abuses in Chile and press for an end to the dictatorship. Steve knew personally many people who suffered torture, dislocation, and death. His continuing interest in exploring the period of Popular Unity government and the Pinochet dictatorship grew out of this experience.

By contrast, his teaching did not, for many years, draw on material directly connected to his personal experience. He taught about regions where the issues he studied were in play but at a remove from places and people he knew. When people would ask why he didn't teach directly about Chile, he would generally answer that it was too close to his own experience.

This particular circumstance holds broader import for Steve, as well, in that as a teacher he recognizes a strong obligation to avoid both self-erasure and self-indulgence. As we discussed this, he explained, *I am always cautious—as we should all be—about turning our teaching into autobiography. As instructors, we are challenged with walking the fine line between making our classes about ourselves and leaving ourselves totally out of our lessons.*

Walking a fine line emerges as an apt metaphor for Steve's work more broadly; and his work gives me new appreciation for the discipline of dynamic balance it entails. With respect to teaching directly about Chile, at a certain point, Steve found over time that he could and wanted to be vulnerable in this way. He could see his way to guiding students into material he had a firsthand connection to without losing either his

connection to it or his capacity to teach it. So he designed a course, called “Dirty Wars and Democracy,” to help his students to study this history, and focused particularly on how to support them to walk the fine line of staying connected to the human experiences making it up, without being overwhelmed by the pain of those experiences.

One path Steve took into this work was to develop an approach he called working with avatars. (See Volk, 2013 for Steve’s writing on this work.) Essentially, each student would choose a person, and a persona, from the historical context as they moved through the course, and write weekly reflections on course content in the voice of this individual. Students’ efforts to speak in the voice of an individual would highlight their perspectives and language choices. With this approach (to which I find parallels with how the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC invites visitors to tour the museum in relation to the path of a specific person who experienced it), Steve cultivated an empathetic and situated consideration of the historical circumstances, rather than a universalizing, abstracted one.

The question of how to prepare students for this kind of learning—to engage emotionally without becoming traumatized by the experience—became and continues to be important to Steve’s work. As teachers reading this will know, the entire question of “trigger warnings” or “content warnings” has ballooned over the past few years. As Steve told me, it had long troubled him that a simple warning is insufficient to prepare students to engage in emotionally protective ways with historical material that includes torture, rape, and war.

As he reflected more on the question of how to prepare students for dealing with exceptionally disturbing topics rather than avoiding or sidestepping them altogether, as some have demanded, he was led, by participating in the practice dialogue project, to see the work of teaching as “care work.” This was an approach that he hadn’t previously articulated, much less understood, but one which emerged progressively over the course of discussions with those involved in this project. To engage one’s students with “care,” he came to realize, is not to shield them from a difficult present or a traumatic past. Neither is it to imagine that, as a teacher, one can (or should) “cure” the suffering they may carry with them into that class, the history that might make the subject matter triggering for them. “Care,” in this sense, means making students aware that you, the instructor, stand with them on the journey, that you *see* them in their complexity even if you are unaware of it, and that you are in community with them.

He began to work with a colleague who was the academic curator of Oberlin’s campus museum, the Allen Memorial Art Museum, using works of art—in their case (though they indicate other objects can be used), an old sculpture and a contemporary photograph bearing images of violence and abuse—in a carefully scaffolded process. Over two 20-minute periods, they would guide students to track and write down their reactions to seeing each artwork, first one then the next, from various vantage points. In the following class meeting, they would invite students to reflect on how their reactions changed over the course

of the observation, and self-observation, periods (Volk and Milkova 2012).

They found that through this process students saw that their reactions tended to intensify as they come physically closer to the art and become less intense as they take a more distant view. They came to recognize their agency to monitor and act in awareness of their emotional vulnerability to the power of an artwork by creating greater distance from or nearness to it. Going beyond stated warnings, this project prepared students experientially. Steve affirms that while he hasn't done empirical research on students' experiences of it, student feedback about the experience has been positive, and its impact on their work strong, as well.

On meeting Steve, I was drawn by his powers of attention. In talking with him and beginning to read his work, I learned that in fact for him the question of how to attend, especially to deeply troubling material, has been a central one. In a sense, Steve's work is to consider how people can learn about and from other people's experiences, including terrible ones, without themselves being harmed in the process. Another fine line. This essential question in and for education, and for the teaching of history, is always with us as we accompany one another in and across time. How to come close enough to try to understand, lowering defensive barriers that harden the heart; and how to protect ourselves in the process—not from feeling, but from feeling that overwhelms our capacity to be present and of use.

As our conversation drew to a close, Steve spoke of how his work on higher education pedagogy grew as he allowed

himself to admit all he did not know about teaching and learning, including his own. *Being able to say I didn't know was freeing; I found I could even laugh at myself sometimes.* Steve is quick to recognize the impact of his positioning here: *"Of course," he added, it is easier for me as a white man with tenure to claim vulnerability. I know that for colleagues of color and for women this can have very different consequences.* As Steve spoke of his awareness of his and others' social location, he attended to it not being simply a matter of personal choice. And to it not meaning the same thing for everyone.

He continued, *For those of us who have spent many years in classrooms, embracing the limitations of our knowledge is ontologically at the heart of our practice. We engage with our students, and with the broader scholarly and secular community, not just to "impart knowledge," but to learn ourselves.*

Steve and I sit together with this idea,¹ feeling—I think in tandem—how important it is, and also how easily oversimplified and even misused. That to teach is to learn is an orientation basic to each of our work. It's also tricky to explain because it cuts into basic cultural beliefs about the character of knowledge and a teacher's authority.

- 1 In fact, at this point of collaborative writing, the "sitting together" took place at a distance mediated by a Google doc. Steve added this section to the draft between us and we took turns, with time for silence, wrestling with, and waiting on the ideas to clarify through our exchange.

How is it possible that teaching is learning, Steve asks, if we, in fact, “know” more than our students? I appreciate Steve’s way of posing this question, how it doesn’t duck the importance of expertise while at the same time broadening the frame of inquiry to make room for relational and contextual realities. Another fine line.

Steve continues, We learn from their questions, from their silences, from their “non-expert” way of putting things together that we, in all our years of training—because of all our years of training—couldn’t put together in the same way. We learn not only about our subjects, but about ourselves. About how to be in community, how to respond to untamed emotions, how to help, and how to get out of the way.

Such observation, of our students and ourselves in teaching, creates ground for learning—by teachers and students—that is responsive and dynamic. (In fact, this theme is highlighted in Chapter 9 of this volume.) It also lets us work beyond the limitations that extensive training, and experience, can bring when they close off avenues for in-time observation and response, rendering teaching, and knowledge, rigid rather than lively, and closing teachers and students off from one another’s differing experiences.

And yet.

Steve is alert to the difficulties such positioning can raise. Recognizing ourselves as evolving learners and vulnerable subjects, locates us, once again, on a fine line. At a moment when higher education is under political attack, and “expertise” is contested and even belittled, to recognize one’s limitations is to invite

ridicule. Acknowledging our limitations can provide ammunition to those who challenge education for its failure to produce students who can repeat immutable truths and reach unwavering conclusions.

But, then again, and always cautious about over-inflating our egos, looking over our shoulder, we might glimpse Socrates, Galileo, Mary Wollstonecraft, and James Baldwin encouraging us to stay the course.

I think here of Steve's work to build students' capacity to give witness to horrific historical material. I think of the bravery of this work and its dangers—specifically, the reach and limits of the agentic choice he fosters for students in light of the involuntary character of some traumatized responses. And I wonder what kinds of relationships—with self and others—support people in working through these challenges, and staying in wholeness. How can our classrooms foster these relationships, this wholeness? What needs to change for them to flourish? I see how Steve's interest in pedagogy joins with his work as an historian to make up a vital and in some sense experimental process, one that nourishes and rewards his attention, and challenges it, ongoingly.

As Steve writes (2022) in a recent piece on this work, there is *no solution to this problem* of how close or how distant to be from the suffering of other people. No one right answer. I come away from talking with Steve with new respect for the risk of deep attention, the fine line, sometimes more like a razor's edge, in listening . . . the vitality and difficulty—bound up together—of this path.

CHAPTER SEVEN



“I SAID NO A LOT”

Sustained by the Success of Others

Carla R. Glover and Alice Lesnick

Carla Glover was a Philadelphia School District principal for 19 years. She did not love her job. *How can you love a job where you have no idea what is going to happen day to day? I did not love it; I was passionate about it!* Carla was especially passionate to nurture and witness the success of others—students, teachers, families. And she is passionate about being someone who did an occasionally detestable (her chosen word) job without losing connection with what brought her there.

This path has sustained Carla throughout her life. At age 19, she wrote a forecast of her career for an undergraduate assignment. Yes, she was studying education and preparing to be a teacher and leader. In the form of a letter to her future self, she mapped out her life's work: instructional leadership, then becoming a school leader, and then a superintendent. She projected that she would retire at 52, following a 30-year commitment to urban public education. *I was just three years off*, Carla smiles. The only difference in the path she took was that she chose not to pursue a superintendent position: *I veered away from this idea once I knew that the work would be more political than relational*. She saw that district level leaders spent much of their time outside of school buildings all together, and definitely outside of personal relationships with students and teachers. That was not her way. So, she said no.

In listening to Carla, and more, in writing to reflect on our conversation, I am learning that sustaining her path—a big yes—has also meant saying no. I am intrigued by this as a way to understand the work of a dedicated educator. While this work is often cast as service, the question of what must be refused in order to serve, in line with one's own values, vision, and thriving, is not often so clear. Also not often clear is the connection between necessary boundaries—the no—and co-creating the success of others—the adamant yes. Carla's path traces a center line balancing these, and showing their unity.

Carla taught children for 10 years in special education; she was also a specialist teacher for grades K-6 in the areas of

science and computer science. Her commitment to her students meant that, *my main goal as a special education teacher was to move kids out of special ed.* Ensuring that students would build knowledge, skills, and confidence to succeed in “mainstream” classrooms, Carla knew she was working in a system where a disproportionate number of BIPOC learners are placed in special education to begin with. Saying no to this inequity from within that system, she subverted it.

As a principal, too, Carla affirms, *I said no a lot.* I asked her to say more. In one example, when she started, teachers in the building had become accustomed to leaving with the students at the end of the day. This troubled Carla because she hoped teachers would be available for brief, incidental interactions with parents as they picked up their children, a way to build community and connection. More importantly, she saw it as a safety measure for there to be adults in addition to herself in the building following dismissal. To make a change, she knew she first needed to understand how the practice had become established. As she put it, *How did the principal before me allow this?* She learned that at one point, teachers had supervised indoor recess during inclement weather and as a recompense had left earlier at day’s end. This had then become solidified without the recess supervision. *I took a hard line on this one,* Carla recalled. She verified that the teachers’ contract specified a specific length of their school day and explained this to the faculty. The practice changed. By moving skillfully between what she refused and what she affirmed, Carla energized her path.

This energy flows through Carla's career and her presence. I first got to know Carla during the early years of her retirement, when her energy led her to the position of Director at Bethel Academy, an after-school tutorial and enrichment program for youth under the aegis of Bethel AME Church of Ardmore, PA. During her two-year leadership at Bethel Academy, Carla engaged and guided scores of college and high school students in the activity of building relationships in order to service the community and after-school participants. Many of my students interned in this program and gained invaluable experience being mentored by Carla's staff. Carla made sure that each intern understood the purpose of the work, with an orientation designed to ensure that they approached it with respect for the children and their capacities.

Carla departed the well-established program to accept an invitation to undertake her current work: teaching and supervising student teachers at Arcadia University. The question that guides all she does to inspire and guide future educators is this: *Are you here to be a good teacher?* I note, now, that this is a yes or no question. Carla is committed to cultivating new teachers who are culturally competent, which begins with being interested in and able to learn from students who they are and what they care about, and also being able to share of themselves with students in these ways. She continues: *There are key filters for making sure student teachers are prepared to be in front of children.* When they don't demonstrate this preparation, Carla holds the line—compassionately but firmly.

Don't feel sorry for your students, she affirms. Don't come in to save or help them. Come to educate them!

Carla emphasizes that holding high expectations for all learners is a core cultural competency. In her practice, this spans academics and other aspects of learning. *This is where being fair comes into play*, Carla explains. Reflecting that her work positioned her as an advocate for students, teachers, and families, she observed that working across many groups of clients made fairness essential and also challenging. She remembers a student she was talking with who had made a mistake in an interaction. This time as every time Carla had to respond to a behavioral issue, she first asked the student what she thought the consequence of her actions should be. When Carla decided, taking the student's view into account, she told Carla that while she was upset she was not angry, because she recognized it as fair.

When parents or staff presented Carla with a problem they were facing, they would often press for immediate response and resolution. Each time, Carla would reframe, asking, *How do you suggest we solve it? What do you need from me in order to solve it?* This shift restored voice and agency to the person bringing the concern, inviting them to co-author the way forward, with support. Listening to Carla draw these threads into our conversation, I recognize that for her, supportive empowerment is part of holding high expectations for all. This comes about through a complex and disciplined practice, in leadership, of balancing yes and no so that individuals' dignity is primary.

In her work now, as when she was a principal, Carla regularly observes people teaching, and then meets with them for feedback and coaching, always seated side by side *to signify we're on the same team*. She opens each debrief with these questions: *How do you think you did? And if you could change something, what would it be?* The first question puts the individual in a seat of agency and self-assessment, giving them the floor and the scope to focus on what concerns them. The second question recognizes the individual's capacity to see beyond what they did and what happened to an "otherwise"—an aspiration, perhaps informed by the experience of what actually happened. Carla's approach validates that the desire to change something next time is inbuilt in teaching, and served by reflection. In a way, there is a no that is made natural and necessary here; being asked what I would change next time invites me to say no to something I did this time. But this no is creative, not a final judgment. It is an invitation to take account and plan for change . . . which means, as I am coming to see through this conversation, I stay on my feet to try again.

On the track of this generative no, I ask Carla what she has learned to simplify or let go of in the course of her career. She pauses, then speaks: *You have to let go of your failures—really quick! You can't let them fester. When facing a failure, I first revisit and reflect. Ask what kept us from meeting the goal. Try to determine how to do it differently or start over. Then, keep moving.*

Carla emphasizes that letting go must happen quickly because she recognizes the danger—to efficacy, confidence, capacity, judgment, and nerve—of becoming immobilized.

With the release of failure returns the energy to come to terms without losing ground. I feel grateful to learn this now and wish I had learned it sooner. I know in my bones I will take it forward.

As Carla speaks, I also notice how she shifts naturally, seamlessly, from speaking as “I” to speaking as part of “us.” *What kept us from meeting the goal?* Defined by the success of others, Carla’s path is not only hers.

CHAPTER EIGHT



RADICAL PARTNERSHIP

No More, No Less

Suzy Roman Quinn and Alice Lesnick

I met Suzy Roman Quinn in 2015. I was a stressed out working mom of two teenage daughters. Having grown up caring for my own mother, who suffered from schizophrenia and depression, I was also working into some new healing. I wasn't sure I deserved or could afford massage therapy, which I associated with luxuries generally out of reach, both economically and otherwise. But I found it helped in a unique way, so with a kind of raw faith I kept with it.

Suzy has practiced bodywork for 17 years with a commitment that flows through her veins and her life. When she speaks, the words sound with the clarity and warmth of touch. We are talking in her living room, where she has invited me for this conversation. But our conversation extends. I have continued to go to Suzy for massage, and last year she offered to mentor me in learning to give it. With her guidance, I've even gotten to practice with my older daughter Lily, now 28, who volunteered to support my learning.

When Lily was born, a friend gave me a book on infant massage. I kept it close while Lily and then our younger daughter June were babies. I would create a peaceful setting—lighting a candle, spreading out a special blanket. Following the book's guidance, I would warm my hands by rubbing them together, then ask “May I give you a massage?”

Suzy calls the hand that keeps contact with the receiver the mother hand.

An advanced practitioner of therapeutic and Thai massage, Suzy works with people who bring many dynamic and co-mingled goals. Some seek relief from physical pain or enhanced mobility. Some seek physical support for emotional healing. Some seek massage to map the body energetically. Some come for peace and nurture, a break from caregiving or a careworn time of life.

At the start of each session, Suzy invites the client to sit in a beautiful round chair placed in one corner of her roomy studio. She takes her seat up on the massage table. The studio communicates Suzy's values as well as her art. The

composition of furniture, color, and adornment reflect her loving presence to the people she works with here. Wherever your eye rests, it finds beauty: a lush succulent on the window-sill; eggplant-colored curtains hanging to the painted floor; light from a sunrise-colored lamp, and through a tall window.

With her full attention, Suzy asks the client how their body is feeling. She gains a sense of the currents to follow. It can be easy to forget that bodywork, like other forms of growth-serving practice, also involves language. Suzy is intentional in hers, beginning with the intake form she asks new clients to complete. There, in addition to collecting vital medical information, she takes care to offer openings for people to share challenges without compelling disclosure. No matter how long she has known a client, she starts each session this way—checking in and learning what they are experiencing and seeking.

There's the verbal conversation and then it becomes a different kind of listening when they are on the table, a different kind of receptivity. When we give ourselves permission to rest on the massage table, there is an opportunity, a possibility, to let our stories be and for peace to flow in. Can the receiver feel more embodied at the end of the session and allow for the work to integrate? Can we create a more expansive space?

Suzy's descriptions of her work are also made with care. Calling her approach bodywork, not energy work, is a

purposeful distinction. While she acknowledges that massage involves the movement of energy as well as muscle and tissue, she represents herself as supporting the flow of energy. Working in radical partnership with the receiver, each time Suzy begins a session, she makes this inner vow: No more, no less. With it, she honors the boundaries that protect her and her client. She renews her commitment not to rush or push, but to allow the present moment to guide her, informed by her sensitivity and cultivation of lovingkindness. In a sense, she asks, “May I give you a massage?” all along the way.

I remind myself: “I move with ease” when my body feels tired or there’s some kind of distraction in my mind. I come back to the breath and my body, I move with ease. I am here, doing the work, there’s no obligation or final place I need to get to. This phrase, mantra, is a call to come back into the body, the breath and the work.

Suzy determined that the work could only be good if it were sustainable. Neither her own body nor her labor could be alienated. Most important, she had to work in conditions that allowed her to make the relationship to her client primary. She had to establish this in order to serve others’ healing, to join the dance—a metaphor she often uses for her work—in integrity. This drew her to become independent and freed her to create her own, interdisciplinary path.

When she first started out, she worked in an office setting, giving 50 minute sessions, back to back, with only 10-minute breaks in between. It was rushed. The work was superficial, simply like performing a task. She was unprepared to work in this way and burnout was inevitable. But she was young with little experience and so much to learn. Looking back, she now knows that there was no time to drop into the flow and connect with the receiver, nor was that encouraged or really supported at the time.

Suzy had the opportunity to start her own practice in 2007. This is where she found the freedom to create space for herself and her clients. She never looked back. In 2016 she opened her current studio in Philadelphia.

Early on, she didn't know how connected she would feel to this work.

I was unaware of the deeper rhythms that were yet to be found: the connection with people I would continue to find and cultivate, the stillness that can overflow into the room, the cadence of breath and meditation that can happen during a session, the peace that can be experienced, the inner listening. And how we show up for one another over and over again.

This is the radical partnership: the deep connection in the present moment that is not limited by words, past ideas, ego, or expectations.

This is when the flow feels open to the subtle and intuitive exchange of information. It's in these moments where the possibility exists to continue to learn and deepen our skills. The work is always evolving.

It's not often that we bring awareness to our bodies in this way for this length of time (60–90 minute sessions). We're able to feel what's happening as it happens: "that area feels tense, there's tightness, or even discomfort." Many times, we're not aware that we're holding in areas of our bodies until the therapist lands there. Then we can receive feedback not only from their body but the client's reflections, as well. Working together to bring ease to the whole body.

I ask Suzy what drew her to this work and she shares about one of her greatest teachers over the decades.

As a young girl, I received hands-on osteopathic treatments from my aunt. My aunt, Dr. Deb Roman, is an integrated family medicine physician. As part of her work, she offers Biodynamic Osteopathy, a specialized approach in medicine that encourages the body's natural tendency toward health.

I remember her hands so vividly; as an adult I would describe them as wide and spacious from my memory as a child. I smile now, because her hands held so much knowledge and wisdom that I was unaware of at the time. Whenever I was at her office, I felt this deep sense of peace in her presence and this freedom to be, that I never experienced before.

It's in conversations with her aunt that she is reminded again and again to reside in the Stillness, and be guided from there.

Suzy asked her aunt to share more with us about her work:

“Throughout my career, I have been given the privilege to learn from many committed and compassionate teachers, who over many decades, have helped me learn to listen to the wisdom of the body. Many of my teachers are experienced physicians who have helped me to develop a highly refined sense of touch in order to assess the minute, inherent movements of the body, identify misalignments that may be impeding free movement of tissues and fluids, and facilitate the body’s innate ability to heal and express health. Importantly, they have helped me cultivate my capacity to connect with what they refer to as the *Stillness*, the generative field from which healing arises.” *When I was 21, my aunt and I visited a bookstore in town and she bought my first two books on bodywork. I still have them; Hands on Healing by Jack Angelo and The Reflexology Manual by Pauline Wills. With her guidance, the study began. Only a couple years later, I enrolled in massage school.*

Another turning point in Suzy’s evolution as a body-worker was her study of yoga. As her practice deepened, yoga’s somatic architecture entered her framework for massage. While you wouldn’t know it if you were on the table receiving bodywork from Suzy, she is practicing yoga throughout each session. This means that a massage begins with her grounding

through her feet and continues with attention to balance and breath, Suzy's own movement and posture supporting her and her client to be present.

The study of Thai massage was a natural evolution. Thai massage sessions are given on a mat or table, without oils, and the receiver is fully clothed. The practitioner works the "sen" lines (energy pathways) using rhythmic compression techniques and dynamic assisted stretches. This work of conscious movement and breath is a form of meditation for both the receiver and giver. In Thai bodywork, she learns to sustain the energetic line, not break it with contraction or tension but rather bring balance to the physical and energetic bodies of the receiver. One of Suzy's Thai teachers asks, "Does it feel good to give, and does it feel good to receive?" *If yes, this is Metta.*

The work I do now is a merging of therapeutic and Thai approaches, using the knowledge and skills of Thai work in giving therapeutic massage. While all of these techniques are important, at the same time I understand that "your presence is more important than your technique," as another teacher taught me.

To become a massage therapist Suzy completed 659 hours at the Pennsylvania School of Muscle Therapy, where she studied anatomy, physiology, pathology, massage therapy, ethics, and completed clinical hours. To keep her license current she must complete 24 hours of continuing education

every two years. She realized when we were writing this book that she has completed over 1,000 hours of trainings; a significant number of these hours are in Thai massage and yoga practices. She shares this, she is quick to add, not to show her level of expertise but to let people know that this work is continual and the study is ongoing.

Looking ahead, Suzy is becoming an approved provider through NCBTMB (National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork) in order to train, collaborate, and teach with other bodyworkers. *I see becoming a teacher as part of my path—to offer to others what my teachers have offered me.*

A new piece of art adorns Suzy's space: a painting named "Mountain Body, River Mind" by Elena Brower. This gift from Suzy's dear friend is an abstract rendering whose forms and colors reminded us both of our inner stability, of the connection of our bodies to the natural world, and of how massage feels like creating a piece of art, the body a canvas. As the afternoon light changes and one of her dogs settles in between us, our conversation turns to Suzy's vision for her work. She holds the teaching of *Metta*, the Buddhist practice of loving-kindness, as the north star of her personal cultivation and her practice with others.

When I am in this space with another person, my hope is that they feel seen in their wholeness and that the space feels safe and free.

In receiving massage, people are vulnerable. In giving it, we are, as well, and as we stay present with what is whole,

hurt, and new in another and ourselves, it's important to be conscious of the boundaries that make healing possible. Suzy's work is a gift to others, whose freedom to receive it or not, in their own time and way, she never denies.

When I was my daughter's age, a dear friend gave me a print bearing the image of a hand with a line written under it: "In you, together with the beginner, is the old hand."

Beginner. Old hand. Mother hand. A circle of art and skill and love. Compassion. This moment. *Metta*. To move with ease. No more, no less.

CHAPTER NINE



WATCHING BOTH

Shira Cohen and Alice Lesnick

How do you fight today and look forward to a good day tomorrow?

And how do you meet people where they are?

Shira Cohen claims these questions as anchors in her work as a teacher and union organizer. Comparing teaching and organizing to her two hands, Shira teaches math in the Philadelphia School District and organizes with the Caucus of Working Educators of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers. She also holds a Masters of Science in Labor Studies

from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. For the past several years, Shira has been a co-educator and mentor of a group of students in the course she and several other community partners co-created with me and my colleagues in the Education Studies Department at Bryn Mawr and Haverford. As she works with the undergraduates, she is also guided by the intention to meet them where they are, and to challenge them to move deeply forward. She teaches them, as she does her own students and her peers in the union, to fight the system when necessary, and to look forward to a good day tomorrow.

As we talk about the ongoing austerity of resourcing in the District, Shira discusses the challenge of working with students not oriented to *playing the game of school* while at the same time feeling concern about their well-being. These years of COVID, struggle against racism, and the deepening wealth gap wear on her students and their families.

Ten years into her career, Shira reflects on how her current roles and perspectives have shifted with her growing experience. An example is in work she has been doing recently to support a new teacher:

She hasn't found her voice yet. She's nervous! And it makes her inward-facing. She was observed by the principal who wrote up an assessment that was quite negative. My colleague couldn't understand the report and told me she thought it was a really good lesson. So I told her that when she met with the principal she should bring me along. I knew that while the principal probably could have

been more diplomatic and supportive, he would not have criticized the lesson so harshly if it were good.

At this point, she is still largely unaware of how she sounds to the kids, since she's focused on herself. It made me realize that it's hard to watch both—and that sometimes now I am able to.

To watch both. In the way that sometimes happens, our dialogue opens a door into the deeper nature of practice. The theme of “watching both” emerges through several of Shira’s teaching stories. When we talk again, I ask if she considers “watching both” an important aspect to her practice.

Yes! There's an example of the need to watch both from this very day!

There's a student in the ESOL [English for speakers of other languages] class who really doesn't play the school game. He's often out of his chair, touching other kids, raising his voice, and interrupting the lesson. So of course he is sitting next to me, because where else am I going to put him?

It was the last day of PSSAs [Pennsylvania System of School Assessment, state mandated annual standardized tests]. At the end of the testing period, this student—who I was 13 years out of patience with—looked up from his test paper and asked me, “Ms. Cohen, am I going to pass 7th grade?”

I looked at him, surprised and intrigued that he was considering this. I asked, “Do you have thoughts about that? Why are you asking?”

“I didn't know how to do anything on the test. I didn't know what to do.”

“Are you worried about this?”

“Yes, I am worried that I haven’t learned what I was supposed to. I think I need to try harder.”

And for the rest of the period, he was a student in the game, focused on doing the assigned work.

In this instance, “watching both” meant supporting a student’s spontaneous reflection alongside awareness of how new it was. Shira responded by watching both his ways of challenging the peace of the classroom and his emergent self-assessment and rededication. If the challenges he posed had taken all of Shira’s attention, when he asked if he would pass 7th grade she might not have heard the power of his question. Instead, she tuned in, opened dialogue, then supported him to claim agency to move differently.

This interaction was supported by the reflective classroom culture Shira builds, which encourages students to bring questions forward. After a test, Shira always asks her students what the experience was like for them, as well as how they think they did. This practice, combined with trust in Shira, informed the self-observation that the student cultivated.

The classroom became peaceful!

And tomorrow?

“I don’t know! We will see.”

As Shira says it, “I don’t know” has a sunny quality. It is not a disavowal of knowledge, but rather an orientation to openness, even we might say emptiness—not vacancy, but, as we start to discuss, a Buddhist emptiness, free of prescriptions and projections. Observant. Curious in the living present.

I don't always wrestle now. Sometimes I observe, pause. And sometimes, like today, I say I don't know and ask for help.

Shira smiles. *I don't remember so many of the books I read in college, but I remember *The Virtues of Not Knowing*, by Eleanor Duckworth. It's true!*

Not knowing is a way to hope—not by way of naive optimism, but through a reservoir of possibility fed by the understanding that the future is unknown and the present complex. Not knowing, as I am learning through this dialogue, is a way of watching both—keeping an eye on what is happening and at the same time keeping the mind open as to what it means.

It can also be a way of revising the past.

Shira's grandmother, Lorraine Weisbach, was also a teacher. Once, after a bad day at work early in her career as a teacher, Shira called her. Two fights had taken place in her room and no one had come to help. Hearing this, Lorraine told Shira, *go in tomorrow and have a good day*. At the time, it sounded implausible. But Shira now gets it. In fact, she often says this to other people and signs emails and texts with it.

Her grandmother had a hard life. After she died, Shira decided to learn more about her teaching. She found a Facebook group of alumnae, all women, from the school in Queens where she had taught business skills—typing and stenography. She posted a photo of Lorraine and introduced herself as her granddaughter, saying she would like to hear from anyone who remembered her. Fifty people responded—former students, and even a colleague who was just starting out while she was a senior teacher. Person

after person wrote about what a good and kind teacher she had been. More than one said that her teaching had led to their success.

When Shira shared this with her mother, she acknowledged it could be hard for her to hear. She hoped it would be useful to her mother, as it had been to her, to know that Lorraine had had such a positive impact at work.

Another way of “watching both”: bearing witness to contrasting aspects of a grandmother’s influence and holding with the complexity of this witness for her daughter and granddaughter. Not knowing what the impact might be, not holding back from the possibility it could be good to share, but also preparing the way with love.

A question arises, grown from the ones Shira carries: *What can be done now?*

Doing what can be done now entails observation—often in constrained, power-laden and high stakes situations—of simultaneous realities; in short, watching both.

This leads to another of Shira’s recent teaching stories, of a day when she called the office to ask that a student be removed from the classroom because he was seriously impeding classmates’ and her work. An administrator came but couldn’t remove the student. She then sat beside a different student and began working with him. After 30 minutes, with the original student still disrupting class but also with other students working, the administrator continued to sit in the classroom. Shira asked if she planned to visit for a while.

At once, Shira was watching the administrator, wondering about her purpose. She also watched herself, her own confusion and concern, and her roles as classroom teacher and as the recently appointed building union representative. She knew she had to avoid polarizing the situation: *If I yell, she has the power.* She watched the other students, as well, as they watched her. Knowing they set their emotional tone in part in response to hers, she radiated calm on their behalf. She watched the clock and hoped the time would pass quickly. She committed to keeping the situation from escalating. And to hoping for a good day tomorrow. Teaching as she watches—so many “boths.”

It's true of organizing, too. New organizers are very focused on themselves and the people they are talking directly to, but experienced ones are watching how other organizers do the work.

Shira's thinking about organizing is informed by her colleagues and her studies. At base, it is like teaching: *You have to figure out what gets people to move.*

Not know, but move. After the PSSA, the student moved in relation to his work. A seasoned teacher joins the union and begins pushing. A new teacher takes up the discipline of watching students.

None of this is linear, final, or singular. Change, Shira insists, is nuanced, delicate, and filled with *the both/and of life.* Watching both, it emerges, is a way of fostering change.

CHAPTER TEN



THE HARSH PATH TO EXCELLENCE (BUT IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE THIS WAY)

Xuan-Shi Lim and Alice Lesnick

For as long as I have known her, Xuan-Shi Lim has encouraged in me a voice I wish to use more often. Precise, candid, and searching, Xuan-Shi's voice glows—with something fiery and with a cooling wit. We met in the early 2000s when Xuan-Shi was a student at Bryn Mawr College. After graduation from Bryn Mawr, Xuan-Shi worked in the area of public health and

later completed a master's degree in psychology at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.

When I wrote to Xuan-Shi in late January, 2023 inviting her to a practice dialogue, I said I hoped it wasn't too late to wish her a happy new year.

I am so happy to hear from you. We just celebrated Chinese New Year, so it's not too late for well wishes for the new year. Thank you for reaching out to me!

I am no longer working as a psychologist. For the past several years, I have stayed home to help care for my three nephews and to support them academically. December was a month of unexpected beginnings, and I hope the signal of a different season for my personal growth.

With a 13-hour time difference between us—Xuan-Shi in Singapore and I in the eastern United States—our conversation on Zoom began in a meditative spirit, and not simply because Xuan-Shi had recently concluded a meditation retreat. Contemplation runs radiantly through Xuan-Shi's life.

Sharing in the child rearing in an extended-family household, Xuan-Shi tends continuity and change, negotiating the terrain of child development as it intersects with identity, culture, and institutions. Our conversation about caring for her nephews and supporting them academically took shape around an organic theme: slowing down to be gentle and to change what is familiar when it does not serve growth and peace.

Xuan-Shi spoke first of learning to speak more gently to herself. *I have come to recognize a quality of harshness that had*

been familiar to my mind, and to accept that this harshness can be harmful.

Life is sometimes better served with softening.

Having taken her nephews to a drumming class for many years, Xuan-Shi recently joined an adult class made up of a group of older women in which *there is no room for harshness*. We spoke of how important it is to experience this possibility in communities that support it.

No room for harshness. In a coincidence familiar in our long acquaintance, I too have been learning how hard I've been on myself and how I had even placed a kind of faith in this harshness, believing that devotion to an unforgiving inner voice was an essential responsibility. For both of us, there has come relief in releasing this belief, and greater access to trust, new insight into the nature of life and love.

Learning to accept that it is natural to make mistakes, to reacquaint with the lesser versions of ourselves, to come to calibrate our expectations for ourselves and others, and to struggle with the complexity of existence, each of us has changed in the time we've known each other.

And it is interesting, isn't it, that a dialogue about care work began naturally with the matter of how we care for ourselves? Somehow this dialogue and this change was prepared by experiences shared at earlier times.

We met at a college that prides itself on a history of academic "rigor," with the positive (aspirational) and negative (rigid) associations of that word fully intact. We share a love of academic endeavor, and at the same time know

the harms of its culture of striving, hierarchy, competition, and approval. As good students, we were susceptible to the undertow.

At the same time, we first knew and encouraged each other while working together in an education department that encouraged questioning the harmful aspects of academic culture. The education courses include an experiential component in which students observe and assist in classrooms or other education settings. I remember in particular a paper Xuan-Shi wrote about the complexity of praise as she had observed, experienced, and studied it. She discussed how different ways of praising a child could be more or less supportive of their dignity and personal agency. Xuan-Shi's work was always alert to questions of children's freedom. These questions live on in her current practice.

As a primary caregiver for her nephews and their academic coach, Xuan-Shi now surfs the waves of academic striving on others' behalf. *As the boys grow, I find myself conflicted between an orientation to their schoolwork that accommodates their daily experience, their natural ups and downs, interests and disinterests, and one that holds them to strict standards for progress and productivity. It would have been easier to outsource their learning needs entirely to teachers and tutors, and not to risk hurting my relationship with the boys.*

As someone deeply dedicated to their thriving, how can I encourage them to meet imposed standards without giving up on their internal and subjective experience? In this context, the purpose of teaching is not to add value to the student, but

rather to support the boys academically to deal with barriers to their natural learning flow so that they can be more successful in school.

Xuan-Shi recognizes harsh academic standards as a familiar, expected part of the education system and its cultural context:

In Asian culture, education tends to be tied to beliefs about the value of hard work, discipline, responsibility, and devotion to excellence. Learning is a means of training one's character, a process of acquiring virtues. Effort and hard work, regardless of the outcome, is beneficial. The emphasis on effort is also one key aspect of the growth mindset which is based on research by Dr. Carol Dweck. In Asian culture, however, the emphasis on effort in the learning process is amplified, developing over time into trust and allegiance to hard work. In Western culture, ideas about education tend to be more focused on exploring individual interests, expression, and creativity. Like a fork in a road, these orientations diverge.

I find myself asking: Where is the middle ground to hold my cultural history and my knowledge of Western parenting and education practices? In this space in the middle, I look at the child in front of me and at myself. How do I relate with you today so we can take a tiny step toward the bigger goal of developing yourself while meeting imposed standards at the same time?

When the academic pressure intensifies, the harshness stemming from my cultural and personal history surfaces as a reaction to meet the challenge. While it has served me well for the most part of my educational journey, it can quickly become a double-edged

sword in my interactions with the boys. I work with this harshness by trying to be mindful of my own experience of it. I endeavor to respond to the boys with gentleness and a smile, even when I feel intense pressure. When tension runs high on a day when either of our spirits are quick to weary, we allow each other some space before regrouping to connect and try again, the next day.

I think of the meditation retreat.

And I think of work we did together—10 years ago—as part of *The Breaking Project* (Lesnick et al., 2005), an online anthology of essays, stories, and poems I edited in the early days of web-based publishing. The project explored how people make radical changes, what I called “breaking,” in life, art, and thought.

Xuan-Shi wrote there: *In both my spiritual journey and clinical work, I find that the challenge has been to initiate the act of breaking (away from conditioned ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving). . .*

We exist in an exquisitely demanding relation to social and academic conventions when we interact with young people about whom we care deeply.

When doing care work professionally, we keep our values, beliefs, assumptions, biases, and even emotions in check, mindful that they do not get in the way of our interactions with those whom we support. We strive to be as objective as possible. But when we are supporting someone in our family, we can't keep those things in check. You have to be real. They are part of you, and it is going to get messy. We tread into the rawness of experience, in the moment.

We want to encourage their individuality and creativity, and we want them to be able to take a socially valued path should they want one, in which case, schooling takes on higher stakes, or at least seems to. When to hold and when to break with the given path? How to respond to conditioned ways of thinking? Xuan-Shi has given weight to these questions in her own choice of life path, breaking with rigid expectations defining professional success and personal satisfaction.

Slowing down is vital to this path. But slowing down is to work against the drive to keep going, to be goal-driven in deciding how to make use of our limited time and resources, every day. Is this drive instinctual or instilled? Slowing down is not the same as taking a break. Rather, it is a break from actively orchestrating the rhythm of our lives, allowing more room to hold uncertainty and anxiety in our daily existence.

In a poem we wrote for *The Breaking Project*, Xuan-Shi used the image of wheels spinning in mud to evoke one aspect of the difficulty of change. Today I see those wheels spinning very slowly. This way, the mud is not greatly disturbed, and there is space for a pause, a sit, and a talk. Time for the natural process of change to occur without striving. Therein lies the beauty of change—that it happens gradually, hidden from view, like the process of metamorphosis. Change cannot be hurried in order to alleviate our anxieties about whether and when the desired change would occur.

One of the major challenges of care work lies in the expectations for change to occur, as if change is something that

can be summoned forth with relentless will, commitment, and effort.

On the contrary, wheels spinning in mud illustrate the daily tension, resistance, and struggle inherent in the process of working with one another to change. Over time, the mud changes, but so do the wheels. Rather than looking for tangible changes as the result of our care work, would we not be kinder to ourselves and others if we choose instead to focus on whether one feels truly cared for and supported during the process?

Xuan-Shi occasionally volunteers with a group doing waste food rescue, which ends late in the evening. In the darkness, she collects unused food from bakeries and routes it to people who can benefit. This work slows down the throw-out, even the evening, to make room for a different cycle, and create access to hidden abundance.

Inner work and outer engagement support care work that softens harsh systems—whether of education or of inner speech—and shifts experience (and discourse) away from scarcity.

That is what it means to feel understood and be seen, which ironically is what we strive to do in our interactions with the children in our lives or with the people we work with in therapy. The themes of being harsh vs. gentle with ourselves and others, and of haste vs. natural rhythms or order, seem to mirror the characteristics of a larger system that we live in, regardless of where we are in the world.

In closing, words from our poem, with invitation phrased as question (Lesnick, 2005):

*Breathing, do you hear the note after the note sounds?
Is waiting for it another way of hearing it?*

And words Xuan-Shi adds today, updating the poem, reflecting changes in our lives and the necessity, and possibility, of changing course as we go:

*The note, wherever it is,
Allow it to find its way;
Let it be.*

CHAPTER ELEVEN



EVERYONE IN THIS ROOM HAS POWER

Ellen Stevenson and Alice Lesnick

Ellen Stevenson meets people where they are, glad to be with them. The twinkle in her eye comes from a fire sustained within. It also reflects light she sees in others and in situations where many don't see it—yet.

We first met when Ellen posted on a local online community web page inviting people dismayed by the 2016 US presidential election to gather in her living room. Having retired from senior leadership and subsequent consulting in hospital administration and moved closer to family, she

said simply that she and her husband were new to the area and sought connection with others at this time. The house filled with people bringing concern and uncertainty combined with a sense that we needed to be, and to respond, together. I sensed this wasn't the first time Ellen had convened a community.

From that initial gathering, repeated many times—in other living rooms, in community rooms and church basements—a group solidified around shared purposes and projects, eventually becoming a chapter of Indivisible, founded and led by Ellen. She spoke truth to power again and again while organizing around key projects related to social and environmental justice, accountability of elected officials, community concerns, including a campaign to save a local wooded area from over-development, and support for a key Democratic win in our state's House of Representatives. Over the years, my husband and I shared in many initiatives Ellen led, grateful not only for them but for what she brought to them.

As we talk, I search for a word to describe what Ellen brings. “Not exactly optimism or hope,” I say, questioning, and Ellen replies without hesitation: “I bring conviction.”

Yes.

Today Ellen has invited me to her home once again, to talk about her path. I open the conversation by asking how she came by her wisdom and what it grows in her. With the flash of a smile she replies, “Wisdom isn't cheap!” and invites me, this time, into scenes of her childhood.

Ellen was the second of five children, born in 1946. Her older sister by three years became her caretaker early in life, a bittersweet relationship that bonded them for life. After the birth of a brother in 1950, her parents bought an old house on stilts that stood along a natural, saltwater creek in Ramblersville, at the edge of Jamaica Bay in Queens, New York City. A former “summer vacation” area for Brooklyn residents, brightly painted 19th and early 20th century homes stood on stilts at the water’s edge, many with boats, and a network of boardwalks over saltwater grasses and mud flats connected them. By the 1950s it was a working-class community of people living closer to the elements than the image of a New York City childhood might suggest.

I wore boots to school when the high tides covered the street and boardwalks in Ramblersville. In the summer I wore a bathing suit all day long! My bed was always sandy. Later, as an adult, I and other mothers would take turns during floods to ferry the school children in a wooden rowboat, stopping at a dock or two to add another child. We rowed to high ground where the children would walk the remaining distance to the school. I loved those trips, dipping the oars into quiet water and seeing the community surrounded by the salt water. Seagulls gliding on the breeze, ducks, fish, and crabs in the water, eel grass growing long, the sun bouncing off the fall colors in the marsh. Living on the water requires adjusting to the rhythm of the tides, and the reward can fill our heart with quiet joy.

Reflecting on the roots of her work as an organizer, she connects them to the way she engaged with the world as a

child responding to an expectation that: *We all would take responsibility when work was to be done, be hands-on and innovative, no matter the challenge. There could be no rest until tasks were done.*

Ellen's mother Catherine was born to a troubled world facing the Great Depression and then World War II. When her young brother died and her mother was institutionalized, Catherine was forced to leave school and work full-time at the age of 12, being the only breadwinner in the family. Her difficult life left her with determination, but also an inability at times to soften when young children needed help, comfort or gentleness. Her mother's drive led her to run the Ramblersville Civic Association for over 50 years, and she was a champion for others who were marginalized and in need of help. And yet with her daughters she could be hard. By the age of 10 each was schooled in housework, helping with the young ones, running errands and gardening—there could be no slackers.

We learned how to scrape peeling paint, putty and paint windows, hang wallpaper, prepare for and then clean up after a flood. Hurricanes with extreme tides required us to prepare the first floor of the house for flooding, hoist our upholstered furniture onto wooden kitchen chairs, check closets to assure all was off the floor. We moved valuables upstairs to keep them safe. Tools, yard chairs, potted plants etc. went into the garage. It was a time of quick action before the electricity was turned off in the house and we retreated upstairs. Sometimes we would pile into a bedroom and my father would tell hilarious stories about living in such an

interesting place where unusual people achieved remarkable feats. My mother would prepare food for upstairs and we would watch from the second floor as the tide covered our world outside. Yards and sometimes fences disappeared under the tide, homes became islands and water would flood the first floor of our home. As low tide arrived, we would all be working to clean up and right the house. We didn't know anything about global warming, but my father would raise that house three times over the years.

Ellen connects difficulties faced growing up with parents who were intelligent, creative, and musical, but who were limited in their ability to parent five children while managing on one salary. The parents themselves had hard lives growing up. When I ask how she came so fully to integrate fierceness with gentleness in her work, a quality in her I have observed often, she answers immediately: *It comes from having been put down, hard, as a child. I know the pain of timid uncertainty, feeling incapable, frightened or dismissed. I remember promising myself as a child that I wouldn't be hurtful, blind or unfeeling to others—especially children. While I can be unrelenting when a wrong must be addressed, I believe fully in helping pave the way with others using humor, strategy, conviction in the talent and value of us all, and I fully believe in the unfailing success of unity in purpose. We all want to be seen as part of a solution; I try to make that happen.*

I am learning more about the conviction Ellen claims. Being convinced of the need to fight for justice is part of it, but so is being convinced that the fight has to be rooted in respect for the dignity and worth of everyone she deals with.

In 1968 Ellen rented a small house in Ramblersville when her first marriage ended. *One night, I was giving my young sons a bath and one told me, “Mommy don’t go outside.” “Why?” I asked. “Some woman is going to beat you up.”*

Some of the local women who knew I was my mother’s daughter bore her ill will because of things she did while leading the civic association—reporting law breakers, illegal dumping, throwing trash in the creek, etc. Eventually, I got to know the women in Ramblersville and the strong bond they shared while living under difficult situations. Poverty, sick children, alcoholism and broken lives were daily concerns. They helped each other without judgment or regret. One problem that was an ongoing annoyance was the fact that there wasn’t a decent road where husbands could park their cars, or deliveries could be made, such as building materials or furniture. There were no mapped or paved roads in Ramblersville, so I began organizing to build a road. Working with the women, we developed a way to usher in cement trucks looking to illegally dump their unused cement, and dump trucks with dirt and rocks. The children would have an important role, waving trucks down as they rode along the adjacent road and pointing them to a long, pot-holed, dirt path, telling the driver to beep his horn. Hearing the horn, the women all came out with their rakes, shovels, etc. and would direct the driver toward the next agreed upon hole where they would dump what they had. Dirty fill wouldn’t be tolerated. Eventually the truck drivers understood the task at hand and would proudly report about the clean topsoil they saved for the women. When the first commercial delivery came down the

“road,” we applauded. Wallboard and lumber was delivered to one of the homes.

Eventually, Ellen met the love of her life, Jim, to whom she was married for 50 years. They moved to College Point in 1973 with their combined children from first marriages: three sons. Eventually their daughter was born. There, Ellen took classes in gardening at the Poppenhusen Institute, a historical building built by Conrad Poppenhusen, a German immigrant who became a local benefactor. According to the Institute’s website, “The original charter specified that it be open to all, irrespective of race, creed or religion, giving people the opportunity to improve their lives either by preparing them for better jobs or improving their leisure time.”¹ It opened in 1868 with a grand parade and orchestra, a gift to the community on the occasion of Mr. Poppenhusen’s 50th birthday. Generations of residents had attended classes and children’s programs there. It housed the first free kindergarten in the United States, and the first library in the area. The basement housed two jail cells and eventually a shooting range. Poppenhusen Institute is a NYC landmark and listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

In 1978 Ellen learned from a friend that the Institute was being sold. Questioning how such a public good could be sold, she and her friend Susan Brustmann organized a community meeting at a local veterans’ organization community hall. Ellen spoke to the gathering about the long

1 <https://poppenhuseninstitute.org/>

history and value the Institute had for the community, suggesting additional programs that were possible if a unified community stopped the sale. *Everyone here has talent, we can paint, raise funds, develop programs, and refuse to let the Institute be sold. It was built for the working class—we are still a working-class community and cannot accept our children losing such an inspiring and beautiful part of this town.* By the end of the meeting, people had signed up to do research, fundraising, carpentry, and painting, to keep meeting with determination, and organize a fight to save and re-energize the Institute. The story of how they won is summarized on the website:

in 1980 the Institute was threatened with sale and demolition, but due to the efforts of a community group and a successful Supreme Court case, this action was prevented. Today, the Institute serves College Point as a Community Cultural Center with a museum component, housing a diverse variety of programs.²

The backstory is that Ellen tracked down the original charter of the Institute in the library of another town, and learned that the building wasn't legally eligible to be sold. With a pro bono local attorney, she met in the NYC Twin

2 <https://poppenhuseninstitute.org/>

Towers with an attorney at the Office of the New York State Attorney General, charter in hand. The representative she met with had just won a case against the Board of Directors of the NYC Museum of the American Indian for the illegal dispersal of a historical collection. A similar situation was occurring at the Institute, and Ellen discussed the disappearance of art, sculpture, and valuable records dating from the 1800s. The State Attorney General agreed to take on the case: *The State of New York vs. The Board of Directors of the Poppenhusen Institute*. The case took three years, and ended with removal of the Board of Directors. The Queens Historical Society took receivership of the Institute while Ellen and Susan continued to organize fundraising, grant writing, programming, concerts, and restoration projects.

Today the Poppenhusen Institute in College Point continues to serve the public, keeping the intent of its founder, Conrad Poppenhusen, alive. It has taken many years to track down and return articles that were sold, but through perseverance and grants, much has been returned and restored. Ellen served as the Chair of the new Poppenhusen Institute Board of Directors for 17 years, and received the Queens County Award for Historical Preservation before moving with Jim to a new home in Mattituck, NY. Her friend Susan Brustman is still involved as the Executive Director. The building continues to be a vibrant, celebrated Queens County community resource.

What Ellen learned from that and other activist experiences is that one person can create significant change by

reaching out and engaging others in shared problem-solving, inviting and helping them see themselves as part of a solution to a difficult situation. *It is empowering when we see a shift occur because we joined hands and each offered what they could do as a piece of the puzzle it took to create a solution. Leaders are at their best when they support, believe in, and encourage others to bring their creativity and energy to the situation at hand. And we should be having fun as we work together; it's what sustains us over the long haul and builds beautiful friendships.*

Ellen's subsequent career in hospital administration began with a temp job she took to help with her sons' school tuition. The story of her evolution in this work warrants a book in its own right, but for the purposes of this one, it's important to note that she brought the same approach, organizing with care to solve problems, at greater and greater levels of responsibility and authority.

In Ellen's childhood home, where everyone was a self-taught musician, singing in harmony was a basic part of life. *We sang old WWII love songs and folk songs while we washed the dishes and did other chores; we sang in the evening with the family. Cathy and I tried to analyze how harmony and chords worked one day while we walked to elementary school.* Following in her father's footsteps, she and her siblings learned to play the guitar by ear. Ellen and Cathy performed Appalachian and Irish folk music together for many years.

Harmony is a through line in Ellen's approach to organizing as care work: inviting different voices to join in making something more powerful, and creating change outwardly

and inwardly. *I think we all want to be part of something beautiful, powerful and good, especially when we see harm being done. With so much chaos in today's world, it's difficult to face each day alone. Problems can bring us together, can be a vehicle for growth while finding solutions and bringing joy to others as well as ourselves.*

When I opened my home to people by posting a note on the local NextDoor Neighborhood site about coming together after the 2016 election, those who responded were all strangers at the door. Some came bearing gifts: a bottle of wine, flowers, cookies, hugs. I don't think they even knew one another, but the conversation was open and honest. I think it was the good will that bonded us that evening. There was laughter and trust in the room. I realized that I had found my tribe: people with similar concerns who were open to talking and perhaps even working together to reach common goals. It is a wonderful feeling. Everyone agreed that we have to keep meeting—that was the beginning of Social Justice Indivisible, which eventually grew to about 500 members.

While we were able to achieve specific goals over the years, it is the human connection, the fear transformed into hope, the action evolving into triumph, and the belief that each of us, all of us, are capable of creating the change we seek that are the big wins in life. I've learned so much from taking a chance and encouraging others to do the same. We worked together and laughed at our foibles and mistakes. We trust and encourage each other, we use humor and hugs to connect in difficult times.

Every generation will encounter challenges, perhaps the most difficult is feeling vulnerable and alone during difficult times. I try

to bring people together for change. It is the most powerful tool we have.

Today, Ellen grieves the recent passing of her beloved husband Jim, a quiet man who knew the value of compassion, generosity, and love. While healing, she is curious, not frightened, about what her next steps will be. She knows they will include grief work, some of which she will do through writing, poetry, and painting. And she knows they will include adventure.

It strikes me that this too is a kind of harmony, perhaps at the base of the others.

CHAPTER TWELVE



MEMORY IS PRESENCE

Lauren Lattimore and Alice Lesnick

Lauren Lattimore works with time.

In doing and caring for family history, she also works with artifacts and converses with relatives. Through encounters with material and memory, she creates visual art and poetry. Sometimes her work is to lift photographs, papers, and other objects out of boxes. To sit, holding and beholding. And to sift—not rushing to catalog or place them into albums, though both actions might become steps along the way. Some artifacts evoke people and places Lauren knows through this work, some come from her own past, bringing it present.



Figure 12.1. Photo of Roberts' Residence Painting in Ink.

The painting above was made from Chinese ink and calligraphy brushes. This is one of several paintings created in 2020 of family homes in the Plainfield area. The house is located in the Sleepy Hollow neighborhood of Plainfield, New Jersey. It belonged to my Great-Aunt Marion and was host to many holiday dinners, summer barbeques, and birthday parties. The Roberts' residence was a warm gathering space for my family.

Lauren's mother sometimes joins her in this work, seeking and sharing accompaniment, witness, and support. And sometimes the work is rooted not in artifact, but in dialogue, as Lauren joins with and invites family members in conversation, welcoming oral histories into shared presence, into

sound—the way an image, once quieted by dust, brightens when the dust is cleared.

Did you know? Lauren asks me, *that baseball is played faster now than it used to be?* We are sharing a meal near Bryn Mawr College, where we first met during Lauren's undergraduate studies. I didn't! And I am just learning that Lauren is a baseball fan, the connection to this famously slow game coming clear. Something called the pitch clock, she teaches me, sets the measure for how soon the pitcher has to let go of the ball. The clock was implemented in 2023 to shorten the game's runtime, a strategy for engaging young audiences used to speedy media.

Lauren, a young person herself, turns from the speed-up. In family history work, which she has done since high school: *I'm not rushing to get it all into an album.*

Instead, she takes a path that shines with what she cultivates: presence, patience, embodiment. She understands the draw of escape and avoidance, so encouraged in our current moment by social media and sound bites, and she chooses to move differently, orienting by long form healing. Like family history work, she knows that presence can be heavy, that it can be personal, intimate, and that it can be filled with love and laughter.

I love the way oral histories emerge through conversation, Lauren reflects, and draws a picture with words of one such conversation, with her mother's aunt. *We were sitting together, each with a glass of wine, but on the phone, not seeing each other, but close all the same . . . Aunt Vernell told stories of her childhood in South Carolina. In August, a week before the school*

year started, many of the Black families kept their children out of school for a week. A white man would come and pick up the children and drive them out to a field. They would bring biscuits, collard greens, and ice water. Their food would be tied up into a tree to keep animals from eating it. "And God forbid you'd forget your lunch. Your pay would be docked for bologna and bread." Aunt Vernell described the large fields with sprinklers stretching out for miles where she and her siblings picked cotton. The children slept at the edge of the cotton field amongst the critters. At the end of the week, the white man would return with horses and a weighing machine. The money they earned would be their school lunch money.

Lauren's path as a family historian runs through the place where she grew up. Many generations on her father's side resided here, in Plainfield, New Jersey. Her uncle was the first Black mayor of Plainfield. Her grandfather founded a church here, and Lauren drives past it every day on her commute to work. Lauren's father was chief of police in the town. Her mother's family spans New Jersey and South Carolina, holding an annual reunion that alternates between these locales. While lineage, ancestry, and remembrance are writ large in Lauren's life, she recognizes at the same time that, *it is the circumstance of Black Americans not to know all of our history.* For Lauren, presence does not mean completion. Lauren's wisdom, like her practice, tunes her mind to a way of understanding and taking her path that does not depend on finitude or fixity. Thus, a key word for her in speaking of her wisdom practice is embodiment.

In college, Lauren recalls, she took a Chinese calligraphy course with the painter and professor Ying Li. Li taught that the brush is moved not simply with the hand or even the arm, but with the entire body, every stroke arising from and expressing the whole. This doesn't mean that the whole may be known outside of the action, or outside of the particular circumstance of its arising. Rather, through embodiment, it—like the family histories Lauren cares for—is known, which means nurtured, in and over time.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



POWER WITH THE FLOW

Morgan Cook-Sather and Alice Lesnick

My path? You mean my trajectory?

Her reframing of my question, from a word recalling ground to one evoking flight, informs my conversation with Morgan Cook-Sather from the start.

Morgan is a sophomore [at the time this was first written] at the College of William & Mary, where she is pursuing a double major in Kinesiology/Health Sciences and French/Francophone Studies. She plans further study and a career in allied health, working *directly with people, hands-on*, to provide care. She wants to ensure that

health care responds to people's individual needs and goals and honors their cultural backgrounds, including language.

Morgan's love of language learning leads her to appreciate the importance of communication in the work of health care. Before she began to study kinesiology and feel what she calls a gravitational pull toward it, an earlier career interest was in medical interpreting. She explains that her interest in bridging STEM and humanities reflects in some ways the work of her parents, one in medicine and one in education.

When I ask Morgan where her wisdom comes from, she smiles broadly: *From being open.*

She continues: *Going with the flow. I'm continually realizing that there is much I can't control, but what I can control is how I respond.* One example is responding to her eye condition. *It used to be that while I was very comfortable talking with teachers about accommodations, I didn't usually talk about it in social situations until I knew someone really well.* Morgan changed this when she studied abroad in Costa Rica during her first semester of college. *Going to a new place gave me a context to be someone different from the person everyone knew at home.* As the program began, Morgan decided to take the plunge, as she described it, and tell new friends early on that she has a visual impairment so she wouldn't have to hold back, think about when to disclose, and anticipate their surprise. In fact, she was surprised at how readily they heard her. And they went on to have a wonderful time together.

I realized that you maintain your power when you set the terms, you know? Rather than start with people labeling me, I could start and they would respond.

So when I got to college, Morgan continues, when I met someone I wanted to get to know, I would either naturally incorporate into conversation that I had a visual impairment or tell them that if I didn't wave back when they waved to me from across campus, this was why. It was much easier than I expected, because of the practice I had while abroad in Costa Rica.

I'm struck by Morgan's imagery of "taking the plunge." When she says it, she makes a gesture, bringing her fingers forward then down in the shape of a dive. And smiles. I come back to this expression in our conversation and share that it reminds me of diving from a high board, a risk impossible to take back. I ask Morgan if having taken the plunge in this context has made it easier to do so in others.

At first, she says no, and our conversation shifts back to her appreciation for the experience abroad and her joy in looking forward to another one. Then she pauses, and I get the feeling of the current changing, like the shift in tempo or tone in a piece of music. Morgan says, *Actually, I hadn't thought of this before, but there is another way I've taken the plunge.* And smiles. *I spend a good deal of my free time in the Music Hall, playing the piano. I love hearing people play in the other practice rooms. One day, a couple of my friends were with me and we heard someone playing an amazing song in the room next door. It sounded wonderful. I really wanted to know who was playing, but I was shy. My friends literally pushed me out the door! So*

I knocked—I basically barged in and talked with someone I didn't know and he became one of my closest friends. Since this interaction, Morgan notes that she has become increasingly comfortable approaching strangers in the Music Hall and talking with them when she is moved by their playing.

The diver swims up from the plunge and breaks through the surface of the water. *I have met the coolest people in the Music Hall.*

At her mother's urging, Morgan started piano lessons at age six, diligently yet without passion. At 12, she won the fight to stop. But during the pandemic shutdown of 2020, she found herself with time on her hands. Her mother suggested she return to the piano, and she was curious. Her father plays, and there's a song in his repertoire, "Maple Leaf Rag," by Scott Joplin, that Morgan loves. She decided to learn it.

Morgan's visual impairment began when she was nine, so for the first three years she studied piano she read sheet music conventionally. When she lost vision and was no longer able to do that, she played by memory as her piano teacher taught her segment by segment of a song. At home during the lockdown, since she could no longer read sheet music, she created a personal system of study. As she explained it, she would watch YouTube tutorials and transcribe each note onto a piece of paper using a modified musical language that indicates the nature of each note, big enough for her to see. She would then bring the transcription to the piano and hold the paper in the left hand as she played the right hand, and then transfer the paper to her right hand and practice the left hand

until she was able to play both hands together. She used this experience, of finding an alternative way to do something you love, as the framework for her senior project in high school, in which she explained her story, her journey with piano, as a resource for those who work in accessibility, for motivation, to raise awareness, and provide support for other blind and visually impaired people. Drawing on her love of languages, she completed the website in English, French, and Spanish, in hopes that it would be accessible linguistically to numerous communities.

Three years later, she still uses that method to teach herself songs, and in addition, now that she is in college, studies with a piano teacher, drawing on the range of approaches she has accessed, created, and now integrates: playing with sheet music, playing with the system she devised, playing topographically (without looking), and playing by ear. This last is the most recent. *During a lesson here last summer, my teacher suggested I play by ear. I'd never done it before, but he said, "I think you have it in you." I found I do.*

It's wonderful, Morgan adds, to have a serious hobby that is so much fun. Something I care about but don't want to do professionally. Playing music with my dad, and his teaching me, too, is great as well. And sometimes I hear someone play Scott Joplin in the Music Hall. Morgan doesn't enjoy performing, but she loves to play for her friends, sometimes learning a specific song because it's a friend's favorite. She loves the way people come together around a piano when it's played. She loves the songs.

Talking with Morgan leads me to consider her power: power of art, of purpose, of self-expression and self-study, of friendship, of risk, of term-setting, and of response. She leads me to wonder how keeping power to set the terms is a facet of her wisdom in going with the flow. As we talk, I observe that claiming power and being open can sometimes seem to be in tension.

Yes, Morgan says. *I used to think so. But I've experienced directly that my power is in my vulnerability.* In initiating an action or narrative, rather than ceding power to others to do so, she explains, she is in a position to respond to whatever comes. *And yes, people will always label because that's what people do, but if you put your narrative out first, it is the primary one, and whatever people assume about you becomes secondary.*

Our conversation returns to Morgan's passion to work directly with people in support of their medical care and healing. *That other people could also have something invisible, like my eye condition, creates empathy from the inside.* Choosing how to respond, informed by compassion. Choosing her trajectory and opening to the current.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



A STUDENT OF THE (CHANGING) DETAILS

Susan Moyer, Loretta Dugan,
and Alice Lesnick

Loretta has invited Susan and me for tea. Winter light slants through the windows. Susan's smile is warm on this cold day.

Loretta Dugan and Susan Moyer were colleagues for well over a decade at a large city hospital. Their mutual regard is evident in the clarity of how they speak together. Loretta has suggested a chapter written with Susan for this book. I have suggested that we start it together.

Conversation begins around a plant Susan has brought Loretta, talk of gardening. I have looked forward to meeting this doctor who gained the trust and respect of the social worker she served with. Susan is friendly and approachable, frank. She's also a bit shy and I remember Loretta telling me that when she first told Susan about this project, Susan said, *I am available to meet your friend but am not sure if I would have anything to add.*

We find our way to the table.

When I ask about their work together, Loretta speaks of how much she admires Susan—and, by illustration, of how, when Susan left that hospital to begin working at a senior living center: *Her patients were bereft. They cried.*

Susan tracks her decision to study medicine to a middle school writing assignment to envision her future career. She and her friend wrote about becoming doctors. Something about this youthful collaboration between girls makes me ask about whether Susan encountered sexism in medical school. At first she says no, but then recalls some challenges. What leavened them, she adds, was being able to “talk behind our hands” with other women in the program. I think of Susan’s and Loretta’s mutual regard. *Oh, yes, Susan says, I could give Loretta any problem to solve.*

There’s much to learn, she says, from working with older people. Here it is, I think I’m on the track of it! So I ask, “What have your patients taught you?”

Oh! Susan replies, almost merrily. Nothing! I learn very little from my patients!

I'm a bit worried. This response seems to contradict my learning so far about what nourishes people who do care work. Isn't there something about the reciprocity of teaching and learning, I wonder, at the base? Susan goes on, really driving home the point: *No, I don't learn very much from them. I usually think they are making bad decisions.*

But, she says, I try to do whatever I can to respect and foster their agency.

Here it is.

There's a man of 90 and he has to give up his car keys. Stopping driving is very hard for people. It occurred to me to ask how old his father was when he stopped driving. 80, he said. Your father was 80? Yes. The man grew quiet, realizing he's now 10 years beyond the age when his father died. Now he finds it easier to give up the keys.

With Susan, care work lays the foundation for people to make difficult decisions with dignity in invariably challenging, complex circumstances. When she says her patients don't teach her, she doesn't mean she isn't learning.

In another example, Susan speaks about a woman dealing with a lot at the same time—and a lot that's changing all the time. She is struggling with decisions about where to live, which medication to stop and which to continue, and how to keep her attention on the needs of the day; sometimes she drops it and gets really angry. Those caring for her also contend with her as she considers various sacrifices and suspensions to try to keep going as independently

as possible. *It's a tightrope*, Susan says, and I remember Steve Volk (Chapter 6) talking about his work as walking a fine line.

Loretta adds: *Weighing autonomy and safety is one of the key considerations of aging. When it's your own life, you focus on the autonomy, and when it's your parents' life, you focus on safety.*

When we think of a doctor—someone with high-level skills, training, and expertise—working with older people who don't tend to move that quickly, are we apt to think of tight-rope walking? It's such a different image from that of comfortable authority, being invited for interviews and given awards at podiums. Describing her work with this patient, Susan says, *I'm really not giving enough detail to make it clear.* She is a student of this detail, and it's always changing.

I'm wondering now whether being a tightrope walker is part of what gives Susan her humility as well as her vitality. . . and I'm learning, in real time, from this physician who loves and cares for her patients because they are human, not requiring that they be wise.

I step back now to invite Loretta and Susan to continue this dialogue. Loretta steps in as the one inviting, having started as the one invited as the book began. That the book begins and ends with care work centered on people's lives as they age brings it full circle. Loretta having been inspired by Susan in this work illuminates how important our colleagues and comrades are to our own path.

Loretta writes:

Our modern medical techniques are only the branches of a very old tree whose trunk is healing and whose root is service.

Rachel Naomi Remen (1996)

I have been reflecting on why I wanted to invite Susan Moyer to a practice dialogue. Among many reasons, her work ethic inspired me and I wanted to be sure this dimension of care work had a place in our book. I joined the Geriatrics Department when my three sons were in elementary school. I felt the tug of their needs acutely and switching gears to turn my psychic energy toward work was often difficult. Susan, by contrast, was always efficient with her time and moved quietly and quickly through the work day with little complaint. I sensed she took the responsibility of her work and her relationship with her patients very seriously. I can remember a conversation when she told me of a patient deciding about surgery who had said, "I'll do whatever you tell me, Dr. Moyer." She held that responsibility with the weight it deserved.

Since I was often called to the exam room on a consult, I could watch Susan in action with patients. There, I saw the personal and professional skills she honed come to the fore. There was a mix of authority, listening, clarifying questions and hands-on touch. When patients or family members had Googled medical conditions and disagreed or even corrected

her, she continued to convey respect without defensiveness. As time went on and I had an opportunity to observe how other clinicians practiced, I could see that Susan would do what she thought was the right thing even when it meant extra work/extra steps for her. Other clinicians sent patients to the ER as it was more expeditious.

I realize I was often inspired by qualities that did not necessarily correspond to medical training but had to do with character. It is a challenge to write about Susan's integrity or the trust she built with patients while keeping the description grounded. Rachel Naomi Remen (quoted above), a widely known physician who trains physicians, has often said that in our culture we are addicted to perfection. I never sensed this in Susan. She had a way of maintaining her focus on the work rather than her performance. There was a discipline that I admired.

On a rainy day this time, over tea and lemon bread, Alice and I met with Susan for further conversation. I was grateful for Susan's continued interest in the project, especially as I have come to realize that conversations with her as the center don't come naturally to her.

Susan had just visited a friend and former colleague, a 59-year-old geriatrician who considered Susan her mentor. This bright, capable woman has developed frontotemporal lobe dementia and is now in a nursing home. Susan, who cares for patients with dementia on a daily basis, feels this change deeply. She described how hard it was to find that her friend no longer has language to hold a conversation—*but* Susan

smiled, like sudden sunshine through the rain—*could she ever sing! Amazing Grace—she sang it clear through.*

Although the topic of grief was never explicitly discussed in our Division meetings, it is a reality that geriatricians navigate on a daily basis. Rachel Naomi Remen often reflects in her writings on the masculine culture of medical training and the idea that showing any feeling reflects weakness. She says, “The expectation that we (physicians) can be immersed in suffering and loss on a daily basis and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet” (Remen, 1996). As I write this, I realize I witnessed and was inspired by Susan’s unspoken empathy for her patients’ suffering. Although her focus on work sometimes came across as emotional coolness, her warm presence with patients and a sense of knowing the burdens they carry always struck me when I saw her work.

Care work at times is about giving enough leeway to help someone make a difficult choice. Meeting with Susan brought back memories of some of the elders we worked with together. One was a delightful patient in her mid-80s, living alone after her sister died. She managed pretty well during the day and took the subway to Center City to do her shopping. The problem was at night. Her apartment had a large picture window that looked out on a fairly busy street. In the middle of the night, “Elsie” had a visual hallucination that men were climbing in her front window. She would repeatedly call her nephew, who would rush to her apartment in the middle of the night. He did not want to dismiss the call in case

someone was breaking in, but this, of course, was wearing on him. A family with means might have hired a live-in caregiver. Services through Philadelphia Corporation for Aging were limited to daytime hours.

Susan fielded urgent calls from Elsie's family and adjusted medication, being careful not to over-medicate. Simple interventions like curtains and sleeping with a light on were not effective to diminish the hallucinations. Susan and I worked together to arrange an admission to the gero-psych unit at the hospital. At a family meeting, Elsie acknowledged that if the pattern continued, she would need to go to a nursing home. The next time she was admitted to the gero-psych unit, all agreed that nursing home placement was the only viable option. It was difficult for me to come to terms with the extremely limited choices available for someone without means and without a family member who could open their home. Giving up independence, especially for someone feisty like Elsie, is profound. At the same time, we worked with another patient who talked with clarity about her wish to go to a nursing home to get the care she needed. There is a certain order and neatness in the hospital that disappears at home. It was fortunate that this patient could be referred to a nursing home where Susan practiced. Knowing that there would be some continuity of care helped make the transition easier.

When she left the medical center to take another position, there was a collective sense that Susan's departure was a considerable loss for the medical center. I ask Susan about this decision. It was eye-opening for me to realize that there

was considerable contrast between the power and authority a physician might have in the exam room with a patient and their lack of voice vis-à-vis hospital administration. The press to do more with less and to see more and more patients was unrelenting. Susan explained she eventually came to the decision to pursue another work opportunity because of this toll.

Working now in a more economically advantaged setting does not mean that Susan is free of institutional challenges. She is given 30 minutes for each patient consult, and expected to complete the accompanying paperwork and follow-up within that time as well. Sometimes it's not enough. And sometimes, she explains, less than the 30 minutes is needed, and yet she can sense that a patient wants to linger. With her customarily frank self-appraisal, she smiles, *You know, I would like to take those 15 minutes back! I need them! But I know that people need someone to listen to them.*

These dialogues have brought memories back to both of us. Remembering the home visits we often made together, Susan recalls that other visitors sometimes seemed disturbed by the sight of things like clutter, stacks of unopened mail, an open can of Chef Boyardee pasta with a fork sticking out on the coffee table. She says, *I never noticed.*

Whether in terms of context or interpersonal interaction, Susan welcomes an unusually broad range of expression, even when unpleasant, on the part of people she cares for. As a student of the changing details, she clears the path, beginning with her own perception, of everything that could impede care.

EPILOGUE

A Book Comes Alive

Alice Lesnick and Loretta Dugan

Living dialogue is ongoing. It flows through time, relationships, and experience. In this epilogue, we offer one more practice dialogue to end the book as it began, in a conversation between Alice and Loretta. This one explores how Alice's path led her to co-create the project. As a dialogue grown out of earlier ones, it reminds us that sometimes what looks like an ending is also a beginning.

THE GENESIS OF THIS BOOK (ALICE)

Traditionally, much of academic life is individualistic—emphasizing how distinguished someone is, how much someone has achieved. An example in my field is that to earn tenure, someone’s first book is expected to be a single-authored monograph, and even co-written articles do not “count” as much as solo-written ones. As if to work with others is a sign of weakness or hiding, or just a problem because you can’t tell who on the team gets credit for what. For the Practice Dialogues Collective, this does not capture the product of our work or the process we experienced, intersubjective and collaborative all along the way.

This book, four years in the making, exists because those who wrote it chose to share their wisdom with me, with one another, and with readers. This organic process stemmed from joy and curiosity to work together in celebration and also concern. To say yes not as a denial of what is difficult, but as an affirmation of all that is possible—beyond what is codified, beyond what we can readily imagine—when people turn toward each other’s survival and thriving.

In addition to the Collective, Lever Press has been a crucial partner. While I learned of Lever through a Google search, if I’d known of it I would have aspired to publish with it. Lever’s values, as exemplified by Acquiring Editor Sean Guynes, are aligned with ours. Sean has been a generous, imaginative colleague throughout the process, from the

initial proposal through peer review and the revision process. To prepare the manuscript for peer review, I sought the assistance of editor Sonia Belasco, who also contributed greatly to the project. With the anonymous peer reviewers, once again our Collective was in luck. The reviews were exceptionally thoughtful and helpful. They caught the essence of the project and also made keen suggestions to strengthen its power. As a Collective, we incorporated their feedback, which focused mainly on ways to amplify the central themes of the book.

The other suggestion both reviewers made was that I, as convener of the project, situate myself more fully in the text. In considering this, I realized more deeply how important it is to me to center the communal bases of this project, beginning with the decision to call myself both a “co-author” and “editor” of the volume. Listening to the peer reviewers and my co-authors, I accepted the possibility that my being more present in the text could inform, rather than undermine, the project’s communal vision. I accepted Loretta’s invitation to talk with her about my path and the place of the book within it. Moving at the speed of conversation here as elsewhere in the book, we met for a practice dialogue; Loretta wrote a reflection (following the process I lay out in Chapter 3), and we discussed it. The dialogue helped me find my voice to situate myself more fully, which I do below, sharing how this book grew out of some of my experiences and interests.

A CONCLUDING (FOR NOW) PRACTICE DIALOGUE (ALICE AND LORETTA)

Loretta: Where did the idea for this collection come from? What shaped your imagination and inspired your approach?

Alice: To begin with, I have a lifelong interest in destabilizing categories and systems of classification. It seems to be part of my nature and it also follows on my experience living outside of convention norms, by chance and by choice. For example, I am skeptical of mainstream ideas about beauty and interested in queering prevailing ideals of success. Both of my parents modeled these values in different ways, and some of my own early experiences confirmed them. My father was a law teacher (he rejected the term “professor” as pretentious) and legal scholar. When he started a new paper, he would request a broad range of books from the university library and read them avidly, making notes on a yellow legal pad. He approached writing as an experiment, and he brought an unusual mix of daring and humility to it.

My mother, whom I lived with and cared for while growing up, experienced bipolar disorder and schizophrenia and was also a teacher of kids with special needs. During her

hospitalizations, I saw firsthand the truth of what Thomas Szasz wrote in *The Myth of Mental Illness* (1961): that in human life, classification often comes linked to power, so to be called schizophrenic means things happen to a person that don't happen, as Szasz put it, when a rock is called a rock. I felt my mother's vitality and brilliance as well as her confusion and suffering, and I saw how disempowered she sometimes was—we were—by the mental health system. I was also disempowered by the sense that all of this difficulty was somehow personal. I could see that the "problem" wasn't hers or ours alone—it was contextual, relational, connected with so many other people and problems—but until I went to college (paradoxically away from my mother) I had no language for this, and no thought partner to bring it into being with me.

So an interest in interdisciplinary dialogue grew in me together with respect for the complexity of people's minds and moods. I was drawn to academic language as a means of understanding and yes—problematically!—of fixing things, while at the same time I had a healthy respect for the irrational, the non-codified, and I was drawn to that aspect of language, as well. The power of language to create questions, counternarratives, and fuel ongoing, unfinished interpretation also connects to my non-traditional but nonetheless real Jewish formation.

And I was drawn, powerfully, to conversation as a way of surviving and thriving. As I grew up, my friendships, based in conversation, sustained me. In sixth grade, my two best friends and I got into an argument during recess. We

informed our teacher that we would come back to class once we had talked it through. He said okay. (That it was even more remarkable for us to ask as it was for him to say yes is another story.) My best friend in high school and I started a two-person reading group to study and talk about poetry by women. We didn't, then, have the nerve to write any ourselves, but we became poets in due course. In fact, when I was a high school teacher, I created a course for seniors at the girls' school where I taught called, "Poetry by Women, Including Us." My best friend in college and I sat together many an afternoon and talked about our families, getting to know them and their troubles, and supporting each other to understand ourselves and care for our lives. Those conversations continue to this day.

I studied literature, psychology, and political theory, seeking a framework to understand dynamics of power and powerlessness; I even took a course given by the wonderful scholar James Scott called, "The Political Roots of Helplessness and Dependency." That is where I read Szasz's book.

My husband and our children are also conversation and thought partners as are my close colleagues. Dialogue is one the bass notes of our family as well as my work. To me, then, being a listener is to engage with the poetry and the prose of people's words, and to listen for their explicit and emergent meanings. I bring this approach to work in intercultural communication, conflict resolution, and, across all, education.

While I am interested in language as a creative medium, I'm also interested in the limits of what can be said and known

in any given situation, and in being as clear as I can about the limits of my own language and thought. To me, this is part of my commitment as a white, middle-class American to undermine the arrogance of supremacist conditioning that tells me I somehow always know what is going on. Dialogue is no guarantee of respect, but it is a necessary precondition. The dialogues at the root of this book, sources of meaning that is not imposed or presumed, make me immensely grateful.

This book is ending as it started: in a dialogue between us.

Loretta: Can you say more about honing your listening skills?

Alice: Sure! I think the basis of my listening skills is my work, over 40 years, as a teacher. Basically, teaching is listening. To understand where students are coming from, what their frameworks are for understanding, I have to listen. I also have to listen internally as I make decisions, moment by moment, in how to respond. This loop of “receive/respond” is one I’ve learned to recognize through *qigong* study and facilitation work, as well. As a learner, I have had amazing role models in the therapists I’ve worked with over my life and in my spiritual teacher.

Loretta: Your light touch and serious purpose come through on every page. The angst that many feel when taking on a project like this seems absent. You engage your co-authors without

putting pressure—more of an invitation and conversation. How did you develop this style?

Alice: It's sweet to hear that it came across this way. I am not sure I know the answer but I suspect it's because the project is so much fun for me. It's just where I want to be, basically all the time. In *qigong*, we practice distributing effort across the body, rather than over-efforting at a single point. This is part of a broader study of moving with precise connection to earth and heaven to foster clarity.

Loretta: Can you say something about the trust that was already established between you and the co-authors?

Alice: Yes, this is important. I had worked in one way or another with each co-writer, though some much more deeply than others. So the invitation grew out of prior relationship. It would be a different project (not impossible, but different) if done with strangers.

Loretta: As Steve Volk observed, you work across disciplines and communities. You go way outside your lane. You seek to understand categories in the broadest possible ways. How did you come to this approach? Have you met resistance from inside the academy?

Alice: I don't think much of categories; I guess because they are often the basis of hierarchies,

which I always want to flatten. To the book, I have not met with resistance from inside the academy—more, at times, with perplexity, a polite confusion. Well, maybe that is a kind of resistance! But you know, I think that with the current disaster in our national polity, and with the increasingly obvious limits on what technology can do to make people's lives better, more and more people are going to start taking an interest in our work. We've been here and we'll be here, come what may.

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About the Authors

Alice Lesnick (editor and co-author) grew up in Philadelphia in a family of educators and became one, to her ongoing joy. She taught preschool, third grade, secondary school, and adult learners (and swimming!) before joining the faculty of Bryn Mawr College, where she has been co-creating the Department of Education Studies since 1997. Alice also co-leads Lagim Tehi Tuma/Thinking Together, a summer learning program and organization centering Black Studies based in Dalun, Ghana. As a professional mediator and restorative facilitator, she convenes the Workplace Advisors group for conflict resolution at Bryn Mawr. Alice is also a poet, a painter (and member of Cerulean Arts Collective), and a student of *qigong*. She and her husband Rob Goldberg have two daughters, Lily and June.

Kamau Blakney, also known as Mestre Kamau, is one of the founding members of FICA Philadelphia, the first Capoeira Angola organization in the Philadelphia area. As instructor and president of the Philadelphia Chapter, Kamau is responsible for weekly instruction of all classes (movement, music, philosophy, and Brazilian Portuguese) and is the primary caretaker of the group's training space located at the Martin Luther King Recreation Center. Kamau has considered Capoeira Angola a way of life for more than 25 years, and while attending an international Capoeira conference in Brazil in 2019, he received the title of Mestre (Capoeira Master) from the founding Mestres of the International Capoeira Angola Foundation. Mestre Kamau is one of a select few US born Mestres internationally recognized in Brazil. He has provided performance and instruction of Capoeira Angola throughout the Philadelphia area for programs such as Young Audiences of Pennsylvania and New Jersey, Hekima Pamoja Cultural Center, Dunya Performing Arts Company, the Olney Youth Arts festival, Bryn Mawr College, and Temple University. As Capoeira Angola synthesizes movement, rhythm, and African-Brazilian history into an artistic form of self-expression, it serves as a unique tool that promotes harmony with others and allows for individual growth. In this effort, Kamau frequently leads demonstrations, school performances, and hosts workshops, including his group's annual participation in the world renowned Odunde African Street Festival since 1996. His goal is to continually provide local communities authentic access to the art form of Capoeira Angola.

Shira Cohen is a teacher and union organizer in the School District of Philadelphia, where she has taught since 2016 and in Philadelphia schools for a total of 15 years. Certified to teach math, science, social studies, and English, Shira sees connections where they are sometimes invisible to others; it's this that leads her to advocate that students' learning conditions are teachers' working conditions. Shira holds a Master of Science in Labor Studies from University of Massachusetts, Amherst, where she connected academic study to her own organizing practice and that of her peers. For Shira, care work spans everything she does, including teaching, mentoring new teachers, tutoring, organizing, archival/literary work; and family history.

Morgan Cook-Sather is an undergraduate at William & Mary, where she is double majoring in kinesiology and health sciences and French & Francophone studies. Since middle school, she has studied French, and she also studied Spanish in high school. She spent part of her sophomore year in high school in Lyon, France, the first half of her freshman year of college in Costa Rica, and the summer of her sophomore year of college in Montpellier. She took traditional piano lessons when she was young, and after losing her central vision to a form of juvenile macular degeneration, she invented her own way of learning new piano pieces. Morgan has given both formal and informal presentations on ways to bring awareness to institutions and the people who work there of the experience of navigating higher education with a disability. She has also co-authored an article on this topic called "From Reporting

to Removing Barriers: Toward Transforming Accommodation Culture into Equity Culture.” She cares deeply about raising awareness of and respecting people’s non-traditional or alternative paths.

Loretta Dugan is a retired licensed clinical social worker. She started her career in child welfare in 1974 as a naive 22 year old who imagined she could save the world. A graduate degree obtained in 1984 from the Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research at Bryn Mawr and a move to medical social work/geriatrics helped hone her skills, provide an atmosphere for ongoing learning and the opportunity to be part of a collaborative care team. Loretta is married, has raised three capable and considerate sons, and is enjoying the freedom retirement brings.

Carla Glover is currently serving as a fieldwork supervisor for student teachers at Arcadia University and leading a teacher preparation course there. Prior to accepting this position she served the School District of Philadelphia for over 30 years as a special education teacher, grade teacher, prep specialist (science & computer science), and administrator. She served children in the North Philadelphia, West Philadelphia, Olney, and Frankford Communities prior to her retirement in June 2017. She is a proud product of the School District of Philadelphia, having attended Anna B. Pratt Elementary, J.R. Masterman Demonstration School, and Northeast High School. She earned her Bachelor’s Degree in Elementary

and Special Education at Morehead State University in Morehead, KY, Master's Degree in Educational Technology from the Philadelphia College of Textiles and Sciences, now known as Philadelphia University or Jefferson, and Leadership Certification from Gwynedd-Mercy University in Gwynedd Valley, PA. Carla is an active board member (Vice-Chairperson) with the Daniel E. Rumph II Foundation and a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Incorporated and Phi Delta Kappa International. Besides travel, her retirement plans have included assisting and educating family, friends, and senior citizens in how to lead a more active, fit, and healthy lifestyle. One year after retiring she completed course work at Philadelphia Community College that resulted in a Personal Training Certification. Having lived in Philadelphia for many years, Carla recently became a resident of Townsend, Delaware where she and her siblings now reside in the same household and care for their mother who is 95 years young.

Lauren Lattimore is an artist and teacher residing in New Jersey. Lauren is passionate about honoring ancestral knowledge to nourish inner and communal peace. Her artistic work is fueled by her admiration for her loved ones, local landscapes and architecture, Chinese calligraphy, and vintage children's books illustration.

Xuan-Shi Lim is interested in exploring ways to engage in care work and live with meaning alongside efficient, results-oriented systems. A strong curiosity about different educational systems

led to her decision to leave Singapore and study overseas in a liberal arts college for women. Experiences along the way, as a student and later a service provider, have led her to continually reflect on how our natural drive to learn and grow can be supported or undermined by systems, and more importantly, how learners can take agency to empower themselves.

Susan Moyer, MD is an internal medicine clinician who spent over 25 years at Albert Einstein Medical Center caring for elderly adults with limited financial resources. She was Chief Resident, Medical Director of the hospice program where she coordinated the care of dying patients and is board certified in geriatric medicine. In her leisure time, she enjoys walks, books, and gardening.

Suzy Roman Quinn is a licensed Massage Therapist and certified yoga instructor. A graduate of the Pennsylvania School of Muscle Therapy (2005), she has maintained a private practice since 2007; her current studio is located in Northwest Philadelphia. Suzy has dedicated her work to the study of massage for the past 20 years and has found deep roots on this path through which she hopes to continue to connect, learn, and share. Her work merges therapeutic and Thai approaches, working together with her clients to bring ease and well-being to their body and mind.

Ellen Stevenson was born and raised in Queens, NYC, and is a painter, poet, and writer who plays guitar and harmonica.

Her activism started at age 16 and continues to this day. After winning a court case in the New York State Supreme Court, she served as the Chair of the Poppenhusen Institute Cultural Center for 17 years before moving to the North Fork of Long Island, where she retired from hospital administration as VP, Regulatory Affairs. She opened an art gallery in Greenport NY until 2008, then provided consultant services to hospitals in NY, NJ, CT, IL and MA for several years before moving to PA with her husband Jim, where she founded Social Justice Indivisible. Ellen continues to encourage others who share her drive for justice, environmental protection, and responsible governance.

Steven Volk's undergraduate years at Brandeis University were shaped by the political ferment of 1964–68, while the ongoing war in Vietnam and the election of Salvador Allende significantly shaped his graduate studies in history at Columbia. After 11 years on the staff of the North American Congress of Latin America (NACLA), Steven moved to Oberlin College in 1986, where he spent the next 30 years in the history department teaching Latin American history and museum studies, all the while being inexorably drawn into fields for which he was ill-prepared, not the least of which was figuring out how to teach in ways that could actually encourage student learning. In the process, he founded Oberlin's Center for Teaching Innovation and Excellence (CTIE), which he directed from 2007 to 2018, and the Great Lakes Colleges Association Consortium on Teaching and Learning, which

he co-directed until 2023. Steven has published widely on Chilean history, US-Latin American relations, immigration, and higher education pedagogy, and has received a number of awards. In 2011 he was named US Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. He is most proud of having been recognized in 2001 by the Chilean government for his “contributions in helping to restore democracy” in that country.

Kira Wu-Hacohen was born and raised in the Boston area. She studied education and anthropology at Haverford College, where she spent a lot of time exploring the intersections and tensions between academic theory and teaching practice. Kira loves to be in spaces filled with creativity and music, curiosity, and reciprocal learning and teaching. She hopes to continue finding and creating these spaces as an educator.