***Transformed!***

**Reflections on My Journey toward Educational Leadership**

L. Marc Ellison

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Michael Cunningham, Ed.D., Committee Chair

Barbara Nicholson, Ph.D., Committee Member

Melissa Reed, Ed.D., Committee Member

David Hermon, Ph.D., Committee Member

Graduate School of Education and Professional Development

South Charleston, West Virginia

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***We Seek Not Rest but Transformation***

~Marge Piercy

I turned to my sister and whispered, “It’ll happen in just a second.”

The minister’s pitch and rhythm were reaching that point where, if the trend played out as usual, several shouts of “amen” would occur and the elderly Mary Bennett would jump from her seat, race outside, and run several laps around the church while shouting praises to Jesus.

My sister wasn’t convinced. “How do you know?”

I answered as Mrs. Bennett exited through the door, her hands flailing and her eyes looking upward. “It’s his voice. I think he hypnotizes her.”

**Introduction**

The charismatic minister of the small, rural church I attended as a child was the first adult I knew who exhibited some of the skills inherent in the leadership model known as Transformational Leadership. He was a role model for adults in the church and able to present a clear vision to the congregation of how he wanted the church to grow. He nurtured relationships, and formed several close ties with church members. In my 12-year-old perspective the minister was larger-than-life; charismatic, sophisticated, confident, and all-knowing.

I was a highly curious kid who questioned most everything. Although I had faith in God during my pre-teen years, doubts about the veracity of Christianity—particularly the legalistic tenets —were starting to form. I brought my concerns to the minister one day after church. He welcomed me to sit with him on a pew, smiled as he listened to my questions, then patted me on the head and said: “You’re just too young to understand. When you’re older these questions will be made clearer to you.” He rose from the pew and left; thirty-plus years later I still recall the disappointment I felt in that moment.

The minister demonstrated many of the skills necessary to lead in a transformational manner. He was charming, clever, and able to lead others to see his point of view. He communicated effectively, and nurtured individual members of the congregation. He was supportive and encouraging. The minister lacked, however, vital components of that leadership model. He embraced the status quo and expected followers to do the same. He had little intellectual curiosity, and seemed disinterested in stimulating that in others. Most obviously, he failed to recognize the importance of a reciprocal exchange of ideas between leaders and followers, a component vital to building the trust necessary to reach goals (Watts, 2011). He knew the answers, and wasn’t interested in hearing from others if they disagreed with him. Disappointed, I decided to find my own answers to my existential concerns.

Watts (2011) teaches that Transformational Leadership is made up of four distinct components: (1) *Idealized Influence*, in which leaders serve as role models who followers learn to trust, begin to emulate, and ultimately internalize the leader’s ideals; (2) *Inspirational Motivation*, through which a leader inspires followers to work toward a clear, understood vision with enthusiasm and passion; (3) *Intellectual Stimulation*, characterized by the inspiration of creativity and a challenge of the status quo; and (4) *Individualized Consideration*, the ability of the leader to connect with individuals in a deep, meaningful way.

I recognized several of those characteristics in the minister of my church, and was drawn to him because of those attributes. Ultimately, however, I lost my connection with him and his vision because he lacked the ability to question, and was unable to encourage new ways of thinking. Throughout the next thirty years I searched out and learned from many who practiced this leadership model. As a result of those apprentice-like experiences, I have been transformed from insecure student to professional to an educational leader. I learned to feel comfortable using the Transformational Leadership style in my work and in my studies. This paper serves as a reflection on much of that journey.

**Idealized Influence**

**Description:** *The transformational leader serves as a role model for followers. Because followers trust and respect the leader, they emulate the leader and internalize his or her ideals* (Watts, 2011).

Despite being an above average high school student, I decided to go to college only two weeks before the beginning of the Fall semester. None of my family ever attended college, and that I might be the first was never considered. Once during my junior year the high school guidance counselor asked if I planned to apply to a college, and I was puzzled by her question. My family worked hard and had a small social circle built around the church. My parents were content. I presumed that was good enough for me.

*The Personal Effects of Idealized Influence*

My then-girlfriend was the sixth of her parents’ seven children. A college education was simply a part of her family’s cultural fabric: each sibling graduated from college, some even with advanced degrees. There was never doubt that she would enroll in and graduate from college. Watching her go through the transition from high school to college was interesting to me, but I lacked the confidence and skills to make the transition myself. When I realized she and I could live close to each other (and eventually with each other) more than one hundred miles away from home, going to college became more appealing. With help and support from her family (and very little support and understanding from my own) I quickly applied and was accepted into Marshall University.

I floundered during my freshman and sophomore years. I was unfocused, and undisciplined. During my second year the Chair of the Speech Pathology department, my first declared major, suggested strongly that I find another discipline to study. I changed majors three times in the following year-and-a-half. The struggle was nearly overwhelming: although I passed most courses and seemed as bright as most of my classmates, I felt uninspired and disinterested. Then I met Dr. Ruth Sullivan.

*The Professional Effects of Idealized Influence*

During the mid-1980s West Virginia was de-institutionalizing, shutting down the regional psychiatric hospitals that housed thousands of individuals with significant behavioral, intellectual, and cognitive disorders, and forming a new system of community-based treatment. Many of those moving into the community were diagnosed with autism, and Dr. Sullivan was creating specialized community-based living programs for them. She spoke in one of my classes and I was intrigued by her ideas. I applied for a job with her new agency and was hired as one of the original dozen employees.

Dr. Sullivan was truly a transformational leader. She had a clear vision of what our agency could become a generation before it did. The passion with which she led, and the way in which she articulated our goals inspired me. She valued intelligence, and encouraged her employees to think in a critical manner. She corrected us in a manner that fit our individual needs, as I discovered after submitting to her my first written report, a monthly summary of staffing for a 12-year old with autism. I walked into her office and saw my report on her desk, covered in red-inked corrections of my poor grammar and sophomoric writing style. “Sit down, let’s go through this,” she said. We spent more than an hour discussing my report. We discussed not only the information in it, but the manner in which it was written. She explained my mistakes, how to correct the report, and why every document produced in our agency should be written in a professional, well-crafted manner. In leadership roles, she said, one’s reputation flavors how one’s ideas will be received. Write poorly and the author’s ideas will be dismissed. Her approach was exactly what I needed; reassuring, encouraging, clear, and logical. I learned to write reasonably well after that encounter. My motivation to write well, however, wasn’t for me. I learned to write well so that I didn’t disappoint her again.

Serving a small role in the de-institutionalization of the state psychiatric system was my civil rights movement. Children returning to the community were struggling with access to schools, neighborhood association groups were fearful and angry about those with disabilities moving into their neighborhoods, and employers refused to consider that individuals with autism spectrum disorders could be productive employees. This mindset ultimately creates a second class – or perhaps even third class – citizenry in our society. It’s a mindset built on uncertainty, fear, and ignorance. And it makes me sick to experience.

*Transformation to Educational Leader*

I was reminded of those feelings while reading “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” by Martin Luther King, Jr. The reading was assigned by Dr. Bobbie Nicholson for her Spring, 2009 Administrative Theory class. I wrote in my learning journal that semester (Personal Communication, LS 705, 2009):

King, Jr. writes poignantly of the need to get outside one’s comfort zone in order to connect with others and, hopefully, participate in the creation of change. Change for civil rights, change in human relations, change in intellectual thought—it matters less what type of chance one is generating, and more that one is actively participating as an agent of change. Finding the courage to facilitate change can be difficult, especially action [that] might be costly. Sometimes, however, one must step outside their comfort zone and participate, simply because it’s the right thing to do. “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” is an important theory King, Jr. strives to convey to those he writes. He can’t simply be content to address problems that affect him, and turn away from the pervasive problems of a racist society. To better his life, he must work to better the lives of every man. Only then will true change occur. While there are two types of laws according to King, Jr.—just laws and unjust laws—it is our toleration of the unjust laws that allows a pervasive sense of injustice in society.

Getting outside my comfort zone isn’t easy for me. I’m quite shy, and more than a little socially awkward. Injustice, however, has always motivated me to become actively involved with an issue. My need to feel connected to a civil rights movement was further satisfied by the job I took at Marshall University in 2006, with the West Virginia Autism Training Center (WV ATC).

The WV ATC had recently started a unique program for supporting college students with Asperger’s Disorder and I was hired to coordinate the program. Because it was the first program of its kind in the country it soon started to receive lots of media attention, and I found myself in an uncomfortable spotlight. In April, 2008, the ABC News program *Good Morning America* highlighted the program, which prompted a small story in *USA Today*. Suddenly I was being asked to speak at national conferences, and heralded as an “expert,” in supporting college students with autism. I was uncomfortable with that label. While I was happy our efforts were successful, the work was too new for us to be given that label. We were thoughtful and professional in our work, but we were learning as we went along.

One professional assumption I’ve made based on personal observation is that the relationship between college professors and college students with autism spectrum disorders was crucial for success. It’s commonly understood that relationships in education are vital to learning, but the dynamic of learning is different in college than in elementary and high schools: professor are hired to teach based on expertise, and many expect the formation of relationships to be initiated by students. Add to that dynamic the symptoms of autism that affect social understanding, communication, and planning, and a meaningful relationship is rarely achieved.

Research conducted as part of two classes on qualitative research methods played a significant role in my transformation into an effective leader in education. As the principal investigator in an IRB - approved study with Dr. Linda Spatig, I gathered data from students with Asperger’s Disorder, and from professors effective in teaching them. Enlightening data regarding the issue of relationship building were gathered from interviews with students. One student, identified as *Student X* in the raw data, discussed the importance of professors leading an effort to form relationships during an interview in Fall, 2010. He advised: “The key is to talk with them outside of the class” (Ellison, 2010). In that same interview Student X provided this recommendation to professors regarding the most effective way to instruct students with the disorder (Ellison, 2010):

If you’d like to know what your student needs, the quickest way to get it out of him is to ask. Autistic people tend to be honest, we don’t really know how to lie and if we do it’s really bad. Not bad for the world, it’s just we don’t lie very well. So if you want to know what your students wants from this class and what he needs to do better, the answer is simple: ask. Stop by and say ‘hey, is this class bugging you,’ or is there something you need to make the experience a little better?’ I would tell you in a heartbeat.

The qualitative interview with Student X and his peers helped me recognize a transformation that occurred with me and in the development of my professional skills. I *suspected* relationships between professors and students with autism were integral to academic success, just as the relationship between any teacher and student is crucial. In my professional role I touted that belief, explained the concept with enthusiasm to professors, and encouraged relationships to be formed. But I didn’t have *proof* of my theory*.* In my transformed role as educational leader I investigated the phenomenon and uncovered proof that confirmed my clinical presumptions.

**Inspirational Motivation**

**Description:** *Transformational leaders have a clear vision that they are able to articulate to followers. These leaders are also able to help followers experience the same passion and motivation to fulfill these goals* (Watts, 2011).

I’ve been fortunate to work with, and have personal relationships with, many who were able to see and articulate a vision more clearly than I. I tried at first to imitate their actions and mannerisms, to duplicate their ability to motivate. Along my path of transformation, however, I developed my own identity as a leader capable of inspiration.

*The Personal Effects of Inspirational Motivation*

In 2004 my wife, a Clinical Psychologist, decided to pursue a terminal degree in psychology. She completed all coursework and the on-site, year-long residency while working full-time in a private practice, helping raise three young children, and serving each year as the cheerleading sponsor and coach for our daughters’ cheerleading teams. Watching her accomplish her goals – with competence and enthusiasm – was humbling and inspiring. I noted the excitement in her voice when she described something new she’d learned in class, and saw the coursework pay off with improved skills in her work. I saw the optimism with which she met all her personal obligations, even though I knew she was tired. The dedication with which she pursued her goals helped transform my pessimistic opinion on returning to college. No longer did the term *lifelong-learner* have a negative connotation for me. I recognized there was value in the effort; it would help me become a more competent professional, improve my ability to think critically about issues, and create yet another community of peers from which I’d grow personally and professionally.

*The Professional Effects of Inspirational Motivation*

My career at Dr. Sullivan’s regional behavioral health care agency was highly successful. The business began with two clients and 12 employees in the first year, and when I left 18 years later more than 500 clients were being served by more than 400 employees. The growth in business and in my professional skills was exciting for most of that time.

Dr. Sullivan was a mentor to me, especially in those early years of employment. She inspired me to care about education and helped me develop a more organized lifestyle. I began to recognize the way in which deep, meaningful relationships with professionals affected positively the outcomes for clients. I changed my major one final time to Counseling, and graduated with a Bachelor’s degree in Counseling and Rehabilitation.

Exciting events were happening at work. Agency staff provided technical assistance on the film *Rain Man*, and one of the clients we supported was an inspiration for the movie’s main character. We opened the first community-based residential program in the country for high functioning adults with autism, and then two years later opened the first-ever residential program for teens with autism. Our innovative service delivery brought nationally known professionals to Huntington to see our work and, in some cases, learn how to replicate it. I was regularly encouraged by Dr. Sullivan to continue my education, but I was too caught up in the work to do so at the time.

After more than a decade of work at the agency I become disillusioned with my education and career choices. I worried I’d developed skills that were too specific, too focused on one particular condition. I knew a great deal about autism and how best to support those with the disorder, but I knew little about anything else. Still working full-time, I applied, and was accepted into Marshall University’s graduate college. I declared my major as Counseling and started taking courses full-time. While in the program I became close to Dr. Bill McDowell, a professor I knew from my undergraduate years. Dr. McDowell was brilliant. Most importantly, mentoring young clinicians seemed his most important personal goal. He was charismatic, innovative, and intellectually stimulating in the classroom. I learned to trust his judgment, and he created a peer community around me in which I felt comfortable and safe to explore new ideas. Dr. McDowell is in many ways responsible for helping transform me into a competent mental health professional.

In early 2003 I started the process to become a Licensed Professional Counselor, and soon after began teaching as an adjunct instructor in Marshall University’s Counseling Program. I had years of experience, but I was newly licensed and did not have a doctorate. I felt like a fraud. I was embarrassed when students forgot and called me “Dr. Ellison,” or “professor.” I taught at least two and sometimes as many as three graduate or undergraduate courses each semester. Students regularly gave me high ratings on their course evaluations. Still, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was a fraud. I wasn’t all that I could be, or all that I needed to be.

*Transformation to Educational Leader*

When I applied to the Educational Leadership doctoral program I thought completing a doctorate which emphasized research and educational leadership would somehow transform those feelings of being a fraud into feelings of competency. I registered for seven hours in my first semester, unsure how I would – or even if I could – perform the requirements for completion.

Dr. Michael Cunningham’s EDF 703 course was the first class I attended. I’m grateful it was the first, because it set a tone for the rest of my coursework. Dr. Cunningham taught us to work methodically to develop literature reviews, research questions, and methods of a study proposal. It was an invigorating challenge for me because the information and classroom activities were outside my experiences and expertise. Dr. Cunningham had a well-defined outcome in mind for what our study proposal should look like, and he worked with us to blacksmith and shape our ideas until the final product reached his expectations. In my previous classroom experiences I noticed some teachers would let students off the hook who were not getting it; perhaps ask less of them once they show they can’t accomplish the task, or dumb down the activity to fit their abilities. Dr. Cunningham never altered his vision or his expectations. After completing my proposal, titled “Educating College Students with Asperger’s Disorder: Assessing College Faculty Confidence in Ability and Awareness of Supportive Resources,” I realized a doctoral program was more about developing thinking skills than it was about passing students through course requirements.

EDF 626, the Advanced Qualitative Research course, was important to my transformation into educational leader. The IRB-approved research required interviews with professors who had success teaching students with Asperger’s Disorder. My first interview was with professor Julio Alves (given a pseudonym in the paper out of courtesy, although he has since given permission to use his real name), a music instructor and primary mentor for a student who majored in classical guitar performance. I knew professor Alves well; we worked together over several years as he struggled to teach a student he knew was gifted but who did not respond to typical pedagogy. Several times I suggested two important hints at strategy: (1) the relationship he forms with this student is vital to learning, and (2) the development of that relationship will not occur in a typical manner. He was going to have to think differently to accomplish this goal.

Professor Alves struggled for several semesters to adapt his pedagogy. During the interview he admitted experiencing extreme frustration early with the student, but described eventually finding the key to unlocking the student’s potential (Ellison, 2011):

Another thing that was helpful was getting him out of the regular lessons. I’d say, “Let’s go across the street [to the coffee shop]. I know you don’t drink coffee, but you drink something and I’ll pay for it. I just want to talk to you. I want to hear your thoughts, what you want to do with your life, what you want to do for your performance career.” And he would initially be a little “Awww…” [body gestures demonstrate uncertainty on behalf of the student] and I realized that he probably had very few opportunities outside of his family environment to have somebody who really wanted to spend time hearing what he thinks.

Describing how he adjusted his pedagogy to teach the student who, because of his disability, had difficulty understanding abstract concepts, Mr. Alves said (Ellison, 2011):

There was also another time I couldn’t get him to understand concept of the dynamics of the piece, of increasing and decreasing the volume of what he was playing. It didn’t seem to make sense to him. And I understand that, you guys told me, how difficult sometimes it is for him to do abstractions, but I took a risk and brought him outside the music office. I got some rocks, and I told him “we are just going to throw rocks.” And we threw rocks toward the sky, and as they went down I said “Do you see how that goes up, then down like that?” He answered “yes,” and started to relax. When we went back to the studio I said “You are going to now play this phrase, and I want you to do with the phrase the same thing you did with the rock. Imagine that the last note of the scale is going to be at the top there, and the final note of the scale is going to be on the bottom. And immediately he was able to respond to that information. From that point on he was able to play that piece without a problem.

More than any other experience the interview with Mr. Alves confirmed my transformation into an educational leader, and made me fully aware of how better developed my skills had become. I didn’t tell professor Alves *how* to develop the relationship with his student; because of the personal dynamics of professor and student, giving specific instruction would have been impossible. I was able to use my knowledge about autism and this student in particular to challenge professor Alves consistently to focus on the development of rapport and a mutual bond. When he trusted me enough to invest in that process fully, a deep, meaningful relationship was formed that resulted in a successful academic experience for the student. The student graduated in 2011 and recently completed a successful tour of Brazil with his guitar ensemble.

**Intellectual Stimulation**

**Description:** *Transformational leaders not only challenge the status quo; they also encourage creativity among followers. The leader encourages followers to explore new ways of doing things and new opportunities to learn* (Watts, 2011).

While in 5th grade at Zela elementary school in Nicholas County, West Virginia, my classmates and I were instructed to stand against the back wall of the classroom while our math teacher separated us one-by-one into two groups: Group 1 was for regular math students and Group 2 for students who needed remedial math. I was assigned to Group 2. The embarrassment that came from that public announcement of my poor math skills, combined with what I suspect may be an undiagnosed learning disability, formed an insecure foundation for most of my academic efforts.

*The Personal Effects of Intellectual Stimulation*

I was not a very good undergraduate student. It may have been because I was a first-generation college student or because I struggled with learning subjects like math. Maybe I was just immature. Regardless, I simply did not have the necessary skills to be successful in my early semesters. After enrolling in and sitting out of school for close to a decade I finally graduated with 154 earned credit hours and a GPA of 2.59. When I returned to graduate school years later I had matured. I completed the 48 hour Community Counseling emphasis in less than two years, and graduated with a GPA of 3.93.

The only grade less than an “A” I received in my Master’s program was in a class titled: “Theory and Practice of Human Behavior.” It was a psychological assessment and statistics course that relied heavily on math. I earned a “B,” but I was lost in the class and should have failed. I was anxious and uncomfortable every time I went into that classroom, and those feelings likely affected my performance. I didn’t speak to the professor about it, and didn’t explain my challenges with the math. I kept quiet and tried to hide the anxiety and stress that I felt.

*The Professional Effects of Intellectual Stimulation*

After working for two decades in a regional behavioral health center the job began to become routine. We were no longer being innovative, no longer a leader in our area of specialization. We were stagnant. In the winter of 2002 I approached my supervisor, the Chief Operating Officer, with ideas I thought would revitalize the service we delivered to clients. His response was: “We do what we do well, and we don’t need to try different things.” I was disappointed in his embrace of the status quo, and dissatisfied with his dismissal of my ideas. I decided to leave.

The decision to leave was a difficult one to make. The agency was the only place I’d ever worked, my social network was there, and I was still optimistic the agency could be better than what it had become. Like the minister in my youth, however, I could not continue to follow those who willingly refused to analyze, think critically, and evolve. I wanted something more, and I wanted those I worked with to want more, too.

*Transformation to Educational Leader*

I knew any doctoral program would contain a series of required statistics courses. One of those courses was EDF 517, which I saved until the very end of my coursework. Although I heard the instructor, Dr. Edna Meisel, taught the course in a practical, non-threatening way, I was frightened of the class because of my math anxiety.

Dr. Meisel created an environment in which I learned stress-free. She was generous with her time, and agreed to meet with me often outside of class or by telephone to talk through problems I had with the material. Her person-centered approach helped me transform my fear of statistics into self-assurance that I could carry out the basics with confidence. The transformation came at the exact time I needed it. During that semester I was promoted to the Associate Director of Training for the West Virginia Autism Training Center. My first assignment was to create a research protocol for a statewide service we provide to families of children with autism. The study, titled “Evaluation of the Family Focused Positive Behavior Support Model” would be used to shape our service delivery in 2012. Prior to Dr. Meisel’s class I would have been unable to create the protocol or analyze the data. What I learned in that class, however, helped me design a data collection system and skillfully analyze the data set.

Co-teaching LS 711 with Dr. Cunningham allowed me to step outside the student role for a short while, and gain confidence in my ability to evaluate the work of peers. Students in that course were well prepared, but one student in particular required some prompting to add more detail to his chapter summaries. At first insecure about that interaction, I recognized that a leadership position requires honest communication, detail, and role modeling to inspire followers to work toward a goal. I spoke openly to him about my assessment, and he then wrote his responses in an acceptable manner.

Further collaborations with Dr. Cunningham aided in my transformation. In November, 2010, we developed an IRB-approved survey-based study designed to assess the confidence of higher education staff in their ability to recognize and accommodate students with Asperger’s Disorder. The survey was carried out prior to a six hour workshop conducted in Nebraska. Results indicate professionals with years of experience are confident in their abilities to recognize the symptoms of the disorder, but not confident in their abilities to accommodate the needs of those students. This small research project is one of the few emerging pieces of data on the issue of growing enrollment of college students with Asperger’s Disorder.

Counseling classes I took as my area of emphasis courses provided me an opportunity to research areas of counseling with which I was unfamiliar. In addition to Family Systems Counseling, I studied Legal and Ethical Issues in School Counseling and Interventions for Current Issues in School Counseling. The Interventions class offered me an opportunity to research strategies for supporting school children with Asperger’s Disorder, and gather more information on the difficulties of the transition into college. One of the more significant assignments I completed in this course was a PowerPoint presentation titled: *Forming Our Community: Preventing Bullying of Middle School-Aged Students with Asperger’s Disorder by Creating a Well-Informed, Supportive Peer Group* (2011).

The intellectual stimulation from my transformative processes continues. For more than 15 years I’ve spoken at state, regional, and national conferences on the topic of developing specialized supports to individuals with autism. Until 2009, each of those presentations was focused on a clinical aspect: practical, how-to methods for delivering services. After entering the doctoral program, however, I was asked by researchers at the University of Alabama to partner with them on a project. We carried out an 18-month IRB- approved study to assess college-readiness for freshmen students with Asperger’s Disorder. The results, which demonstrated that mood and anxiety affected grade point averages, were presented in 2010 at a poster session of the International Society for Autism Research. Being listed as a co-author in a research project instead of my more usual clinical presentation was thrilling for me; the graduate college Dean awarded me a certificate of merit for “Outstanding Scholarly Activities.” The experience and the recognition helped boost my confidence in my ability to carry out research.

**Individualized Consideration**

**Description:** *Transformational leadership also involves offering support and encouragement to individual followers. In order to foster supportive relationships, transformational leaders keep lines of communication open so that followers feel free to share ideas and so that leaders can offer direct recognition of each follower’s unique contributions* (Watts, 2011).

*The Personal and Professional Effects of Individualized Consideration*

It is my intention to always provide those I supervise at work and those involved in my personal life the consideration necessary to meet their individualized needs. As an administrator, a counselor, a college instructor, a father, husband, and friend I recognize the importance that focused attention has on creating meaningful relationships. I don’t believe, however, that I have experienced the individual consideration described by Watts as fully anywhere as I’ve experienced it from the staff of Marshall University’s Educational Leadership program.

Dr. Dennis Anderson’s Higher Education Law course provided an opportunity to learn about disability law, particularly the Americans with Disabilities Act and how it relates to college students with disability. He rightly challenged me to broaden my focus to topics other than autism in higher education, and I became interested in the administration of community colleges as a result. His ability to get the best of my efforts was a direct result of his taking time to get to know me as a person.

Dr. Simone’s writing for Publication, CI 677 was an inspiration! I was unsure what to expect when I enrolled, and was happily surprised by the broad and diverse styles in which we learned to write. Her teaching style was inviting and the environment she created helped set a tone for writing. A semester after I completed her class I was asked to be the lead author of an article titled: “Alternative Tomorrow: A PATH Toward Social Inclusion” (Ellison, et al., 2011) in *Parenting Special Needs Magazine*, an on-line publication. I used many techniques suggested by Dr. Simone to write that article, which was well received by the audience.

*Transformation to Educational Leadership*

I was anxious and unsure during my first semester in the program. I recall sitting near the back of Dr. Nicholson’s LS 707 course on the first night, listening to everyone else in the class talk as if they all knew a secret I didn’t. I wrote in my learning journal (Personal Communication, LS 707, 2008):

Being the “new guy” in the class is a little intimidating, particularly since this is my first semester in the doctoral program and still fairly unsteady on this path. I’m a little envious of the others; they seem to know each other well, and use a commonly understood inside language that I don’t yet get. (p.1)

I didn’t know Dr. Nicholson well, and felt extremely vulnerable confiding to her my anxiety. I was sure she would reply with a comment similar to “suck it up and get over it.” Instead I received the exact response needed to transform my fear. She was encouraging, personal, and quick to explain the classroom dynamic. She wrote (Personal Communication, LS 707, 2008):

Sounds a little like a fraternity/sorority. ☺ I guess it is, in a way, to the extent some of them have been together for a year or more now and one needs to sort of be assertive to crack the combination. On the other hand, if you’re bright and show the potential for humor, they’re pretty inclusive. They’re even more inclusive if you show the wherewithal to engage. You fit in quit well, I’d say.

Dr. Nicholson was always encouraging, even when she was telling me I’d committed an error. An email from her in which she bolstered my optimism while telling me I didn’t complete and assignment speaks to that. She wrote (Personal Communication via email, December 11, 2008):

What fun! I enjoyed immensely reading your thoughts as they developed through the semester – particularly the self-assessment that concluded your entries – and I had the luxury to do so since the others’ journals have yet to appear. Here’s the problem with being an over-achiever thought; you sometimes miss things because you move quickly – especially if you’re trying to wrap up your own teaching responsibilities. No big deal. Really. Just go back to the website and to the learning modules where you found the research ethics studies. I mentioned in an 11/5 discussion board message that I may be posting a couple more things either prior or subsequent to the final class meeting—and I did. They’re short questions, though, and focus on issues other than the readings so you needn’t go back to your notes or anything. If you’ll answer those two in a message back to me here, you’re finished. Completely ☺ And don’t worry about the Friday deadline. As long as I have those by Sunday, that’ll be fine. I can get started reading the others in the interim.

During the same semester I was also enrolled in Dr. Cunningham’s Research course, LS 703. Although this course provides a basic overview of the research experience, the information was all new to me. Most of my studies to that point focused on the practice of mental health counseling; research and leadership topics were a bit like studying another language to me. Like Dr. Nicholson, Dr. Cunningham was patient, deliberate, approachable, and communicated well with me. He created an environment in which I could feel secure, and in which I could stay encouraged despite my lack of knowledge in education or research. Slowly, his mentoring helped me transform from shy student to confident leader. I was thrilled and relieved when I approached him about serving as the Chair of my committee, and he agreed.

Dr. Cunningham served as a sound example of transformational leadership. He inspired me to perform better with his humor, his attention to detail, and his ability to communicate to me the “bigger picture” of education-based research. It was not uncommon for me to receive back from him as late as midnight edits to papers I sent via email earlier that day. And each time those edited papers were complete with thoughtful suggestions and inspired recommendations. He was encouraging each time I worked with him, even if it was during a common activity such as hosting “How to Find Portfolio Activities from Your Coursework” at doctoral seminars. I so appreciated his actions that I began re-evaluating how I interacted with students in my classroom to ensure I was being as encouraging as possible. My transformation to educational leadership continued.

EDF 625 and EDF 626 were pivotal courses for me. Each was a class on Qualitative Research, and each was taught by Dr. Linda Spatig. Qualitative research relies heavily on qualitative interviewing; skills similar to how a therapist might ask open-ended questions and solicit responses. I entered those courses over-confident that I already had the skills to carry out basic qualitative research. I was wrong. Although Dr. Spatig recognized I possessed some advanced skills, she also recognized the need to challenge me to improve and evolve. She was enthusiastic when I approached her about investigating the manner in which college students with autism were taught. My initial paper, “Educating College Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders” (2010), was well received by her, which encouraged me to continue my interest in the subject. Dr. Spatig placed value on peer reviews of projects, but wasn’t shy about offering her own critique. She provided more constructive feedback to me than any professor I’ve encountered – ever! Sometimes I disagreed with her recommendations, and she maintained an open invitation to debate with her when that occurred. Most of the time her suggestions were correct, however, and helped me transform further into a more confident student-researcher. I found her reflective writing exercises to be valuable in helping me form my research identity.

Speaking at the 52nd Annual Southern Regional Council on Educational Administration (SRCEA) with Dr. Cunningham provided another opportunity for professional transformation. Our presentation was the first break-out session on the first day of the conference, so I was unsure what to expect from what was my first ever non-autism themed conference. We shared the breakout time and audience with professors of mathematics who described a new technique used to teach math skills. My paper, titled “Educating College Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders” (Ellison, M. and Cunningham, M., 2011) was one of two in the entire conference that addressed a non-academic subject. I was insecure about how the topic would be received. Dr. Cunningham introduced my portion of the discussion in a way that made me feel comfortable and made the audience feel as if they were hearing something important. I also felt an overwhelming sense of community from the audience, which was made up mostly of Marshall University doctoral students and professors. I began my presentation feeling like a clinician; before it ended I realized I felt more like a leader in education.

**Conclusion**

Experiences I’ve had with transformational leaders have influenced heavily how I conduct the personal and professional aspects of my life. Because of their inspiration and individual attention, I learned to be comfortable questioning things I was taught, debating new professional service models, and helping others learn to question things too.

A few months ago someone stopped at my office without an appointment to say hello. He introduced himself to me, and reminded me that several years ago he was a student in a counseling class I taught. Traveling through Huntington on business for his agency in Cincinnati, he stopped in to thank me for inspiring him to continue in the social service field, and for helping him develop a person-centered perspective. I was touched by his kindness. I was also reminded that it isn’t always the most obvious leaders who influence us as we grow and evolve. Sometimes we’re transformed by the subtle actions of others.

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