

Finding Joy in the Journey: Sustaining a Meaningful Career in Sport Management

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In her 2020 Earle F. Zeigler Award address, Marlene Dixon presented and discussed five elements of a sustained career in academia: Lifelong Learning, Authenticity, Relational Mentoring, Work-Life Balance, and Faithfulness. Dixon suggests that remaining open to new learning and taking risks helps increase capacity and vigor. Authenticity brings richness, voice, durability, and purpose. Relational mentoring brings connection, community, enrichment, and longevity. Cultivating work-life balance, rest, and self-care not only helps avoid burnout, but also improves creativity, playfulness, and liveliness. Finally, leveraging the extended metaphor from Tolkein's *Leaf by Niggle*, Dixon argues that faithfulness, rather than visibility or measurable outcome, defines the meaning and value of our work and contribution not only to science, but also to our life circles.

Keywords: development through sport, mentoring, occupational commitment, relationships, sense of community, work family issues

It is so weird to be standing here. This talk was originally supposed to take place in San Diego last May in a room with a view overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Instead, we are coming to you from the luxurious third coast of College Station, Texas, with a view of, well, nothing.

It is so weird to be standing here. I mean talk about icing the shooter. I feel like I've been standing on the free throw line for 18 months waiting for the ref to hand me the dad-gum ball!

It's SO weird to be standing here. I've been coming to North American Society of Sport Management (NASSM) since 2000 in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and have had the honor of listening to and introducing a number of incredible colleagues deliver their thoughts to the field from this platform; hearing what is core to people's mission in sport and how they think we can do better. Over the years, I have heard many incredible talks from this platform from some excellent scholars and wonderful people. I have introduced this award (I think with a formal march-in with bagpipes?). I have introduced my favorite people from this platform. And, I have handed out some NASSM awards in some pretty crazy venues (sorry, there will be no hockey announcer voice today, even with a triple dog dare from Brianna Newland).

Given the esteem I have for every one of the former Zeigler Award winners, it is truly a privilege and honor to stand before you today as the 2020 Earle F. Zeigler award recipient for the NASSM. Thank you all for taking a few minutes of your day to share this honor with me.

As I said, I've been coming to NASSM for just at 20 years. I look back to those early conference days when I was a graduate student, you know, when you mapped out a full 3 days of sessions, took copious notes at EVERY one, and tried to drum up new projects to work on. For me, it was like the peanut vendors at a baseball game—peanuts, popcorn, and projects. Get your hot projects here!! I was open to any projects, looking for a team, specifically hoping for ones that would land me my first *JSM* publication.

Those grad school days were also when I only knew everyone by their publications and awkwardly tried to introduce myself to these amazing people whose work I was reading and trying to digest and figure out this whole thing we called sport management research. Oh, you are Doherty (1995)? I love your model! So nice to meet you Danylchuk (1999)!! Yes, I think becoming more globally minded is important, too. Thibault (1993)? We read your paper in Chella's doc seminar! I am just starting to study strategy!! And I thought, what is this whole research thing? I'm not sure it is for me. I will most likely head back to coaching, with maybe some teaching on the side.

Fast forward 18 years, and I'm at the last conference I attended in person. I headed out the front door of the hotel in my shorts and t-shirt to go for a run (yes, instead of a session) and came across a student looking a bit lost—I asked if I could help her locate her destination, and then introduced myself. She said, Marlene Dixon? The Researcher?! As you can guess, after I made it far enough away to not embarrass the student, I fell over laughing.

Yes, I guess I am Marlene Dixon, the researcher. Dixon et al. (2020). Not at all to disparage the compliment from this very earnest student. What is funny is that just like at my first NASSM, I have never really seen myself as that. I just always have always felt like Marlene Dixon, the person that wants to help make sport programs more of what they could be. The person who wants to study meaningful problems, to help people and organizations figure things out, and to provide support and encouragement to empower ideas and dreams.

Jim Collins (2001) would say this kind of approach is what I have been encoded for. It's what is in my DNA; it comes naturally to me. It is what brings me joy. It energizes me. I love a good puzzle in an idea or manuscript or an organization. I love to hear people's stories and ideas and dreams, and hopefully have something to speak into them.

Over the years, I have found it best to speak from what I know—to stay in my own lane. In that spirit, and in embracing my own encoding, I would like to offer this discussion, a fireside chat as Chris Beard would call it, a few thoughts on life in academia

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that have helped me sustain a career through the myriad events, people, transitions, evaluations, and emotions that are part of this crazy journey. I hope within my musings about *my* journey you will also find a nugget that resonates and lifts you along your own.

Because we need a bit of organization for this discussion, because we need to have a little fun, because Matt Katz will not be denied his boxes and arrows, and because every academic model needs an inordinately long and complex name with accompanying acronym, I present to you the Dixon Career Longevity Model for Joyful and Ultimate Sustainability—affectionately known as the CLMJUS. The following Figure 1 depicts a diagrammatic overview for this discussion.

Lifelong Learner

The first factor that I believe sustains one over the course of their academic journey is being a lifelong learner—this is about being humble and open to new learning (Li, 2016), and exercising the willingness (Napoli, 2007) to embrace the risks and surprises that come with new adventures. Legend has it that after becoming an esteemed teacher sought after by many students, Confucius was impressed by a 7-year-old prodigy who responded to Confucius’s questions with quick wit and also posed questions that outsmarted the master. Subsequently, Confucius acknowledged Xiang Tuo as his teacher. Whether this legend has historical accuracy is beside the point; the real appeal is that even the “exemplary teacher of all ages” (萬世師表) had room for further self-improvement in learning and that he was the first to recognize this personal need and to seek learning even from a child (Li, 2016).

I can relate to this legend in the sense that I find that I am constantly in the presence of people that are smarter or wiser or have different life experiences than mine, and that when I am open and listening, I can learn so much from each of them. As I think back even over the past year, I have learned so many things from people of all ages and walks of life.

I have learned so much about resilience from my son Justin, who continues to persevere regardless of the limitations people want to put on him. I have learned about flexibility from my son Cody, who is constantly adapting to different situations and demands from coaches, teammates, and friends. I have learned about altruism and friendship from my daughter Avery, who endlessly supports her friend group and helps champion each of their distinctive gifts. I have learned so much about listening and

loving people from my husband Stuart, who sacrifices daily for our family and for the kids in our community. From my friends Sam in India and Salim in Kenya, I have learned about capacity building—how they find a need like rickshaw driving or guest transport, and build whole livelihoods from there. I’ve learned much from grassroots sport program leaders like Dennis Orek, Emma Owiro, Torrey Bates, Gideon Ochieng, and Irene Waite about perseverance and creativity, about staying the course in overwhelmingly difficult situations. My former doc students have taught me so much. From my first student, Jarrod Schenewark, who has pursued a career that honors his family first, to my most recent graduate, Arden Anderson, who is doggedly true to her identity and values. My current doc students continue to help me learn new things—Baykal has taught me about institutional voids and about blending strengths from multiple fields. Daniel has taught me a ton about student development, all things Aggie, and all kinds of Excel tricks. Ashlyn has given me an incredible global perspective; she helps me question a million assumptions, and always pushes me to be my most authentic self.

In academia, it is easy to get caught in a success orientation mindset—I just need to finish my dissertation, and then I will have arrived. I just need to get a good job, then I will have arrived. I just need to get a *JSM* or an *SMR* publication, or Research Fellow. I just need to get tenure, or associate or full, then I will have arrived. George Napoli (2007), successful entrepreneur and business educator, argues that “in order to be fulfilled and to grow personally and professionally, we need to change our success orientation and develop a growth orientation where we constantly establish new goals and challenges for ourselves based on learning and growing.” I couldn’t agree more.

In my experience, while there may be markers and milestones, there is not a destination, and we need to continue to find new avenues for growth and learning that will help us continue to build success in ourselves and others. If we are going to thrive over the long haul, we *must* remain teachable and humble.

Humility, teachability, and openness to experience can look different to different people and at different life stages. It may look like learning a new literature base, a new technology, a new leadership or relational tool, new approach to organizing or managing, or new relationships themselves. Ultimately, learning is complex and requires people to face different challenges at the individual level, which also depends on the societal and cultural norms associated with their environment (Regmi, 2020). It may look like a new job, a different aspect of a job, teaching a new class, or heading research in a different direction. It might be something nonwork-related like a new hobby or sport.

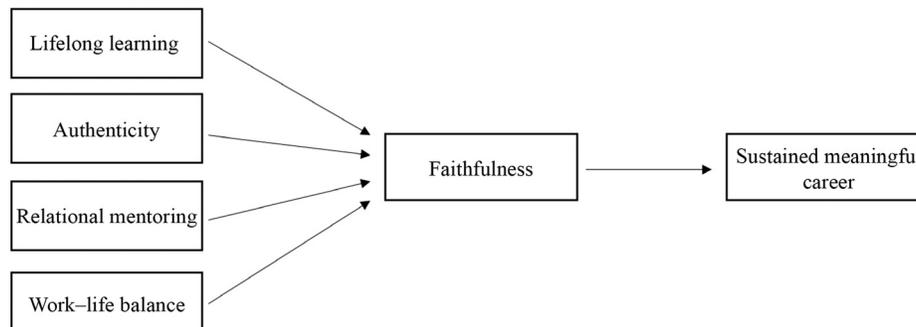


Figure 1 — Organizing framework: Dixon Career Longevity Model for Joyful and Ultimate Sustainability.

The challenge with remaining teachable and open to new learning, however, is that it makes one uncomfortable. It can be stressful and requires both effort and agency in the process (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2018). I often find myself wanting and thinking that if my life were more ordered, predictable, and within my control, it would be better, maybe easier, and certainly less convoluted. However, I've often found that the best things in life come with risk, surprise, and within the messiness of the unexpected and the discomfort of putting oneself out there to try something new.

In my life and career, I have taken a few risks (e.g., travel, new jobs, partner organizations, grad students, new theories, teenagers) all requiring a level of challenge and the insecurity and awkwardness that comes from novelty. But with each challenge, I have found renewed vigor, increased capacity, the joy of adventure that not only keeps me thriving, but also reminds me how very much more there is to do, learn, and grow. I challenge you to take the risks and to never feel that you have arrived.

Authenticity

One of the most important aspects I have also found to longevity in this academic journey is authenticity (Wayne et al., 2019). In fact, I think over the last year, the concepts of authenticity (Cha et al., 2019; Javed et al., 2021) and vulnerability have resonated with me in new and powerful ways that continue to compel my thinking and action. Maybe I'm just old. Maybe I've watched one too many Brené Brown Ted Talks. Maybe the pandemic helped distinguish for me what I really see as important. But, over the past year in particular, the need and desire to be me (dumb jokes and all), and to lead and write and study in ways that give proper value to the things that are important to me, has really become integral to all I think and do.

As I have moved through this career, and as I have watched the careers of really great scholars unfold, one thing that I found is that it is absolutely essential to study things that are important to us. I think of Wendy Frisby and her examination of grassroots sport for women. This grounded work that involved the participants in ways that Frisby had long deemed essential both to process and outcome brought her great purpose and joy, and the lasting impact of the inquiry and the programs themselves followed. It has inspired me to do the same in my work in Kenya.

I think of Janet Fink and her unwavering pursuit of improving sport visibility for women. The more she studied the issue, the more powerful her voice became in speaking toward the problems and the solutions. I think of George Cunningham and his pursuit of social justice in sport. I love how he knows why he studies what he does, even if it is not apparent or understandable to others. And Laurence Chalip, what a privilege it was of mine to work with such a visionary and deep thinker. I still remember having to look up words after every conversation and meeting with him. Laurence is the only person I know who can actually say salubrious socialization, and mean it with all his being.

The pursuit of knowledge and problem-solving in areas that resonate with us does amazing things for a career in academia. It brings a richness, a voice, a durability, and a purpose. I'll never forget Chris Green's consistent prompting in my early years at Texas. She'd say, "Marlene, you can cite 30 sources on this and tell me in detail what all these other people think. But, what do you think?"

At the time, I didn't really have thoughts, but as I found the things that were important to me—creating new and better

opportunities for girls and women in sport, fighting for work-life balance, building sport that enhanced life quality, mentoring—I found that I actually had ideas, and theories, and questions. I had a voice in the work.

So, while I understand that there continues to be enormous pressure to publish in quantity, which can drive us out of our core, and that there is also increasing pressure to do "fundable work," I have found it and watched it be a painful grind to do work that is not very meaningful or authentic to who one is as a scholar or a person. If you are young in the field or maybe burning out a bit, I encourage you to turn off the pressures to do "projects," to do things that are "good for your CV," and focus your study, hone your efforts on the problems that resonate with you. As your questions are authentic, so will be the answers.

Relational Mentoring

A third aspect that I have found to be essential in this academic journey is the need to cultivate relationships and live within community (Dixon et al., 2020). As Confucius teaches, "Human flourishing depends on the support of other people . . . therefore, human flourishing is not conceptualized primarily as an 'individual' process inside the skin, but is deeply rooted in the web of social relationships" (Li, 2016, p. 152).

In sport management, Dan Mahoney (2008) captured this well many years ago in his inspiring Zeigler talk about community—*No One Can Whistle a Symphony: Working Together for Sport Management's Future*. In this talk, he emphasized the need to work together within and across universities to build our field both in size and prestige. He said, "By working together, sometimes across institution types, we can produce more and better research. In fact, a recent comprehensive analysis of over 20 million papers from a 50-year period found that collaborative research was more successful than solo authored work, and this difference was increasing over time" (Wuchty et al., 2007, as cited in Mahony, 2008, p. 5).

Now, as many of you may know, I love to hike. Give me a mountain and I am on my way. I love to run, too. And for most days a walk around the neighborhood (Texas is a little shy on mountains) will also suffice. I do my best thinking when I hike. I feel joy when I hike—the mountains and trees, the pines and aspen, the greens and blues of the meadows and skies, and endless vistas. But as much as I do love to enjoy these moments alone, I have had some of my best adventures and most invigorating conversations and memorable moments walking with others.

When I was a kid, growing up in Colorado, on many a summer weekend, you'd find the Link family traipsing across a mountain trail, building a fire, scrambling over boulders, or playing a boundaryless game of kick the can. As a college kid and young adult, I hiked with friends. It has been the joy of my life to hike with a tall drink of Texas water, my husband Stuart. You know the guy with the long ole legs, a spirit of adventure, an incredible sense of humor, and patience to put up with my endless stream of wild ideas.

We added to the fun as I threw my kiddos on my back and hiked with them. Now, they haul me up the mountain (and race me down it). I don't think I'll ever be able to keep up with them, but it sure is a blast adventuring together. Some of our best memories are on a trail or around a campfire.

To Mahoney's point, over the years, I have walked and hiked with many of you in NASSM, EASM, SMAANZ, AASM, and WASM destinations. From Canmore and Ottawa and Halifax, to Sydney, Melbourne, Warsaw, London, Langkawi, Seoul, Cologne,

Bern, and even a crazy week in Santiago (tear gas and all), my career in sport management has led me to some amazing destinations. Even more so, it has led me to incredible opportunities for growth, learning, discovery, and friendship.

Indeed, there are times that serving in NASSM felt like work as we hashed out the operating codes for the 100th time, or painstakingly carved the WASM Constitution for 2 days in a windowless conference room in Malaysia, or restless nights grappling over tense conversations where resolution seemed impossible to achieve. But mostly serving NASSM, and the global sport management experience, has been a joy and provided endless stories of people's lives and of sport-related issues that we have bantered and sought solutions and that drive us forward to continue pursuing answers. Janet Parks and Jackie Cuneen, you were right—I will never regret getting involved in this organization.

While collaboration and relationships in general are absolutely essential to surviving and thriving in academia and life, I'd like to address a particular type of relationship that has been paramount to my career. That is the relationship of mentor-protégé. Both roles in this relationship have been core to my longevity and fulfillment in the profession.

Darren Kelly and I have previously discussed the value to a protégé of having a constellation of mentors whereby one would build a "personal board of directors" (Kelly & Dixon, 2014, p. 509) that could be helpful in a variety of capacities—athletic, academic, emotional, career, and spiritual. This has certainly been true for me. I think of the many mentors that have poured into me over the years—incredible sport management scholars like Chris Green, Laurence Chalip, Maureen Fitzgerald, Jan Todd, Janet Fink, Chella, Karen Danylchuk, Marijka Taks, Bob Baker, Pam Baker, Paul Batista, David Shilbury, and Annalise Knoppers. They have helped me so much to grow and develop as a scholar and thinker and leader. And in my personal life, such wonderful people like my parents, my parents-in-law, Dr. Sheryl Tynes, Becky Geyer, Eric and April Nelson, Barbara Orr, and Eric Geary. Individuals who have imparted such wisdom across many spheres of life, who have seen me at my worst, but always help me be my best.

In her Ziegler address, my PhD advisor, the one and only, Dr. Buckeye herself, Donna Pastore (2003), discussed the value of mentoring in the field of sport management. Having the privilege of being advised and mentored (and still mentored) by Donna, brings to light the importance of this for development of individual strengths, navigation of power networks, career opportunities, and cultivation of fruitful research collaborations. Donna and I have discussed this at length over the years, most recently trying to understand more about how to transition people from protégé to mentor and to promote the incredible benefits of mentoring, especially to the mentor.

I'm not sure there is a more fulfilling relationship in all of academia than that of a mentor. Ragins (2016), in her most recent work, has described this as "Relational Mentoring," which she argues is a focus not on mentoring relationships in general, but on high-quality mentoring relationships—how they are formed and the benefits thereof. I suppose in many ways much of what she has written has already been organic to my academic career, but I am going to borrow from her well-developed concepts to suggest a few lessons I've learned about the value and process of relational mentoring and how it can enhance one's career both from the perspective of a protégé (Ragins, 1997), but especially that of a mentor.

Relational Mentoring Is Mutual

Relational mentoring is mutually beneficial for protégé and mentor. Ragins (2016) suggest that:

In average quality relationships the mentor helps and supports the protégé, but there is little expectation of reciprocity in learning or growth. The mentor may gain status, prestige, loyalty, and a sense of satisfaction, but both members view the relationship primarily as a "one-way street" that focuses on the protégé.

In contrast, high-quality mentoring relationships are a "two-way street" where both mentors and protégé's actively learn and grow from each other. Two-way relationships are more likely to meet both members' needs. (p. 232)

In my career, I think of this in terms of the many, many things I have learned from my graduate students. They have taught me everything from the use of new technologies and styles of communication to entire theoretical paradigms. They bring light into a dreary day, provide a sense of humor, and push me to learn more about people and leadership. They push me to question assumptions and approaches and continue to force me to grow and expand in my thinking and writing.

Relational Mentoring Is Communal

As Ragins (2016) argues, "Most work relationships rely on exchange norms. Exchange norms use an economic approach . . . Relationships are viewed as transactions, and people are motivated to give in relationships when they expect to get something in return" (p. 233). In this, protégés in particular are expected to reciprocate. For example, I (the mentor) help you with your manuscript, you (the protégé) grade my papers. This may work to "get things done" but ultimately constrains the potential of the relationship.

Conversely, what if the relationship was built on communal norms? That is, not on self-interest or exchange, but on meeting the needs of the other? Scholarship has shown that "in these relationships, members give because they care for the well-being of their partner, not because they expect something in return. These trusting relationships are likely to be high quality because members' needs are likely to be met" (Ragins, 2016, p. 233). The value of these relationships is not in a transaction, in some economic or social exchange, but in gaining from each other to expand one's capacity and sense of self. Close relationships of this sort let us bring out the best in each other.

Relational Mentoring Is an Honest Kind

This idea has emerged for me over many years of manuscript reviews, reading others' reviews, and mentoring doc students. The core of my thinking here is about being honest in feedback, packaged in kindness. In other words, it's not kind to not tell the truth, but we have to do so in ways that build, not tear. In this way, kindness does not mean soft or easy, it means having the best interest of the person in every aspect and form of feedback. As Ferrucci (2006) puts it,

To act honestly, even at the risk of saying an unpleasant truth, or of saying no and causing distress to others—if done with intelligence and tact, is the kindest thing to do, because it respects our own integrity and acknowledges in others the capacity to be competent and mature. (p. 30)

In order to maximize our success as a field, and as mentors, we must consider the feedback of Harley (2019) and find ways to promote a truthful assessment of academic work.

In my experience, as a mentor and person in a position to review and “pass judgment,” I find I have incredible opportunities to exert influence in people’s lives. That exertion can either tear down or build up. Quite often, it is easier, quicker, and takes much less effort to tear. However, as I have the best interest of the other person at heart, whether that is a student, a colleague, an author, or a presenter, I find myself seeking to find and speak truth, yet do so in a way that is palatable, helpful. It takes more time and effort to weigh my words and my attitude, but I find that in the end, even the most difficult conversations usually end up advancing both the work and the person.

Relational Mentoring Is Holistic

High-quality mentoring relationships have the potential to be so much more than work-related. This holistic perspective allows for a much broader array of relational outcomes that extend to life domains, work–life balance, and growth over the life course. As Ragins (2016) states, “In a nutshell, while average relationships may help members ‘do their jobs,’ high-quality relationships help them ‘live their lives’” (p. 234).

I love how this has played out across hundreds of students in my classes and academic experiences, but particularly among my relationships with doc students. There are far too many stories than I could tell in this realm, but suffice it to say that my most enriching mentoring experiences have come after my students graduate and we engage in each other’s lives—through job changes, family changes, joys, and hurts. In sum, there is tremendous value both in being mentored and in mentoring. And when done well, embracing the ideals of relational mentoring, pretty soon you don’t have mentors, protégés, networks, constellations, or collaborations—you find yourself surrounded by friends.

Work–Life Balance

In that vein, the fourth major factor I have found toward longevity in this career is work–life balance. I know, no talk from Dixon et al. (2020) “the researcher” could be complete without at least a tiny dip in this realm. As most of you know, I’ve been doing work in the area of the work–family interface for many years. What started with my friend and colleague Jennie McGarry as a personal conversation over coffee became a full agenda that has grown to include a number of studies, co-authors, contexts, and continually emerging discussion.

Over the course of time, my thinking in the area of concepts like conflict, work, family, life, balance, enrichment has changed and has become clearer and nuanced in their meanings. Thus, I feel it is worth sharing a couple thoughts that have emerged from continual research in the area and from living it out as my own work and personal life have shaped over time. Most specifically, I think we, err, I, need to fundamentally shift my thinking in this area away from work–family conflict and toward work–life balance.

First, over time, it has soaked in that work–family implies a particular social construction and often implies a “family” that has children living in the home. Clearly, that is a restrictive notion to suggest that only people who have their own children living in their home deal with balancing paid work and other interests. Many people have significant life interests outside of work that they battle to find time, emotion, and energy to invest in. Many of you have

hobbies or serious leisure pursuits like travel, golf, running, or skiing. Others of you, I hear your stories of volunteer interests in organizations like Boys and Girls Clubs, the National Court Appointed Special Advocate Association, or Mobile Mutts. Some people have aging parents or family members who need a lot of assistance. Those life interests and their relationship to paid work need to be captured in a broader concept of work–life interface, rather than restricting our conceptualization to work–family.

Second, the notion of conflict is, well, frustrating. As Jennie and I have often discussed, using the concept of conflict frames the relationship of work and nonwork as constantly embroiled in frustration, where the best end one can achieve is no conflict. The best you get is survival. This mentality leads us and others to boost each other with platitudes like “Keep your head above water,” “Hang in there,” “Just keep swimming,” yet these connote the best we can do is keep up or not drown. The result is a cloud of incessant guilt that settles over the life of one who is endlessly caught in a juggling act of obligation and conflicting responsibilities, but can never hope to be enough to any of the people or tasks demanding attention.

While conflict is certainly one characterization of this relationship, it is not the only outcome. Building on the work of Garey, Hewlett, and others, our collective work in sport management—collective meaning the scholarly studies from many of you—such as Sarah Leberman, Farah Palmer, Jarrod Schenewark, Mike Sagas, Sally Shaw, Jeff Graham, Mike Newhouse-Bailey, Shaina Dabbs, Matt Huml, Liz Taylor, Erienne Weight, Soyoun Lim, and Arden Anderson—this body of work collectively suggests that conflict is certainly not the only outcome of holding multiple life roles. In my own life, in our continued research in the area, in my friendships and relationships across various life stages, it is obvious that work and life realms enrich each other, they enhance each other, they spill over in positive ways, they segment to build as separate blocks in positive ways. They complement to build upon each other and to, as Anita Garey (1999) said, “weave a life” (p. 15).

How can we not only get used up, but also build capacity? To not just get back to zero, but also to grow? Instead of just soldiering on, what if we actually made time for strategic retreat? To rest, to heal, to mend, to play? What if we actually made time for personal development to learn a new skill or broaden our capacity? In the end, if we are to sustain a thoughtful contribution, avoiding burnout in any realm, we must fight well to tend to the creative, the playful, the relaxing, and the self-care that keeps us lively, sustained, and truly balanced in our heart and soul.

Faithfulness

The final factor, perhaps a mediator in this model, is the concept of faithfulness. Faithfulness, I will define as simply persevering or being durable in the work and relationships presented to us over the life course. To that end, I’d like to tell you a story that has been of great inspiration to me as I think about my work and contribution to the larger body of science and to people’s lives.

I have found that over the course of my career there is much discouragement—the work is hard as a doc student balancing coursework, teaching, writing, and some semblance of a personal life. And to top it off, all your faculty advisors tell you that it only gets worse. As faculty, the grind is real—there’s always more to write, more to prepare, more to grade, and more students to wrangle. Our colleagues can be selfish, students are often thankful, and of course, there is always Reviewer 2.

And as I talk with so many of you—and I know for me—I have often felt discouraged in this journey for two reasons. One, is that the work rarely feels like it is making an impact, especially in changing practice. For example, I often feel like no matter all the work we've done in understanding and challenging the work-life culture in sport, that culture will not change. And for all the sport-for-development work we do, there is so much more to be done. It really feels like a drop in the bucket.

The second is that the judging is real. At every stage, there is someone to critique, and evaluate, and pick apart your work. There is no such thing as an “accept as is” in our teaching, research, or service. If you work in a business school, the kinesiology people frown upon that. If you work in a kinesiology program, the business school people look down upon that. If you are at an R-1, then you are not student-focused. If you work at a teaching institution, you are not a serious scholar.

I hear this in so many conversations with so many young colleagues, and I hear this in and about NASSM every year. People are anxious. People are frustrated. People are discouraged. And people feel this way because no matter what they do, they do not feel their work is valued. They do not feel that it is contributing, especially not in the ways they hoped it would, and they do not feel that they matter.

As Tim Keller (2014) argues,

In all our work, we will be able to envision far more than we can accomplish, both because of a lack of ability and because of resistance in the environment around us. The experience of work will include pain, conflict, envy, and fatigue, and not all our goals will be met. For example, you may have an aspiration to do a certain kind of work and perform at a certain level of skill and quality, but you may never even get the opportunity to do the work you want, or if you do, you may not be able to do it as well as it needs to be done. Your conflicts with others in the work environment will sap your confidence and undermine your productivity. (p. 89)

In fact, he argues that we should expect to be regularly frustrated in our work, even if we are in exactly the right vocation.

The word discouragement essentially means to take apart courage, or take apart heart. When we are discouraged, we lose heart, we lose courage, and we lose stamina to continue on the path. The opposite of discourage is en-courage—to give heart, to strengthen courage, to put the heart together. I hope today that this final word would be a word of encouragement for all of you to continue in your path toward the unique contribution in sport management that you are already making in the short and the long term.

Conclusion

Near the end of his life, J.R.R. Tolkien became somewhat despondent that he would not finish the magnum opus of his career and life, the *Lord of Rings* trilogy. As a deep thinker and philosopher, his writing often took tangents and bunny trails that were interesting and compelling to him, but made little ultimate contribution to the finished written work. Can you relate? As he grew older, he worried that he had spent too much time niggling about in details and in interruptions of life—things like conversation, and tending to friends and family.

One morning he woke up with a short story in his mind and wrote it down. When *The Dublin Review* called for a piece, he sent

it in with the title “Leaf by Niggle.” It was about a painter. The story begins like this:

There was once a little man called Niggle, who had a long journey to make

Niggle was a painter. Not a very successful one, partly because he had many other things to do. Most of these things he thought were a nuisance; but he did them fairly well, when he could not get out of them There were some other hindrances, too. For one thing, he was sometimes just idle, and did nothing at all. For another, he was kindhearted, in a way. You know the sort of kind heart: it made him uncomfortable more often than it made him do anything; and even when he did anything, it did not prevent him from grumbling, losing his temper and swearing (mostly to himself). All the same, it did land him in a good many off jobs for his neighbour, Mr. Parish, a man with a lame leg. Occasionally he even helped other people from further off, if they came and asked him to. Also, now and again, he remembered his journey, and began to pack a few things in an ineffectual way: at such times he did not paint very much.

He had a number of pictures on hand; most of them were too large and ambitious for his skill. He was the sort of painter who can paint leaves better than trees. He used to spend a long time on a single leaf, trying to catch its shape, and its sheen, and the glistening dewdrops on its edges. Yet he wanted to paint a whole tree, with all of its leaves in the same style, and all of them different.

There was one picture in particular which bothered him. It had begun with a leaf caught in the wind and it became a tree; and the tree grew, sending out innumerable branches, and thrusting out of the most fantastic roots Niggle lost interest in other pictures; or else he took them and tacked them on to the edges of his great picture. Soon the canvas became so large that he had to get a ladder, and he ran up and down it, putting in a touch here, and rubbing out a patch there He listened to what they said, but underneath he was thinking all the time about his big canvas, in the tall shed that had been built for it out in his garden.

One day Niggle stood a little way off from his picture and considered it with unusual attention and detachment. He could not make up his mind what he thought about it, and wished he had some friend who would tell him what to think. Actually, it seemed to him wholly unsatisfactory, and yet very lovely, the only really beautiful picture in the world. What he would have liked at that moment would have been to see himself walk in, and slap him on the back and say (with obvious sincerity): “Absolutely magnificent! I see exactly what you are getting at. Do get on with it, and don't bother about anything else! We will arrange for a public pension, so that you need not.”

However, there was no public pension. And one thing he could see: it would need some concentration, some *work*, hard uninterrupted work, to finish the picture, even at its present size. He rolled up his sleeves and began to concentrate. (Tolkien, 2016, pp. 9–12)

As the story goes, Niggle did not finish his tree. In fact, he made very little progress. While tending to his neighbor, he became ill, and was called away on his journey to the afterlife. Because his

painting remained unfinished, after his death the canvas was used to cover a hole in his neighbor's leaky roof. The only part of his tree that survived was one little leaf that they put in the local museum, titled *Leaf by Niggle*.

In his afterlife, Niggle worked for a while at various jobs, and eventually came to a place of decision where two voices decided his fate for the next step. One was the voice of judgment. This voice that argued Niggle's accomplishments were nothing, that he had been grumpy, and that he had not prepared for his journey. The first voice suggested maybe he was not so amazing at painting trees, but instead, he has a penchant for leaves. He loves the details of a leaf, the perfect sheen, the veins and details. But in doing so, he becomes discouraged at the progress of the whole, thinking that the small details are of importance to him, but of little significance or contribution to others.

The second voice, the voice of mercy, spoke of how Niggle did tend to his neighbor, how he sought nothing in return for his kindness, and how *Leaf by Niggle* had a charm of its own. This voice suggested that Niggle had a kind heart, and that he really did make a contribution, one that was uniquely his, and one that allowed him to move on in his journey. In fact, it is in a time of helping his neighbor that Niggle falls ill and passes from the earth—discouraged and despairing that he had not finished his painting. Ultimately it is decided that, as a reward for his kindness, Niggle will be allowed to continue on his journey, out of the mines and into a beautiful country. Tolkien (2016) continues:

Niggle pushed open the gate, jumped on the bicycle, and went bowling downhill in the spring sunshine. Before long he found that the path on which he had started had disappeared, and the bicycle was rolling along over a marvelous turf. It was green and close; and yet he could see every blade distinctly. He seemed to remember having seen or dreamed of that sweep of grass somewhere or other. The curves of the land were familiar somehow. Yes: the ground was becoming level as it should, and now, of course, it was beginning to rise again. A great green shadow came between him and the sun. Niggle looked up, and fell off his bicycle.

Before him stood the Tree, his Tree, finished. If you could say that of a Tree that was alive, its leaves opening, its branches growing and bending in the wind that Niggle had so often felt or guessed, and had so often failed to catch. He gazed at the tree, and slowly he lifted his arms and opened them wide.

"It's a gift!" he said. He was referring to his art, and also to the result; but he was using the word quite literally.

He went on looking at the Tree. All the leaves he had ever labored at were there, as he had imagined them rather than as he had made them; and there were others that only budded in his mind, and many that might have budded, if only he had had time. Nothing was written on them, they were just exquisite leaves, yet they were dated as clear as a calendar. Some of the most beautiful—and the most characteristic, the most perfect examples of the Niggle style—were seen to have been produced in collaboration with Mr. Parish: there was no other way of putting it.

The birds were building in the Tree. Astonishing birds: how they sang! They were mating, hatching, growing wings, and flying away singing into the Forest even while he looked at them. For now he saw that the Forest was there too, opening

out on either side, and marching away into the distance. The Mountains were glimmering far away. (pp. 31–32)

It is a gift! Why? Because Niggle was sooo amazing? No, because Niggle was faithful. He painted the leaves he was called to paint and served the community right in front of him. Because it's not about painting the whole tree. It's not about painting the perfect tree. It's about being faithful and diligent to serve the work and the people who come into our lives as we walk out this journey.

I just want to remind you that, like Niggle's tree, just because you can't see the impact, doesn't mean it is not there. Just because right now it is not all you hoped it would be, doesn't mean it won't someday be all that and more.

If you, like me, sometimes get discouraged or derailed by the challenge of it all, if you ever ask yourself in the midst of your stagnant or nonexistent H-factor, "Has the little leaf that I have painted really made any difference in this world of knowledge and in the lives and careers in which I attempt to contribute?" I hope this address is an encouragement to you regarding yourself and your work.

If you take away one thing from this address, I hope it is this: No matter your career stage, no matter if you are at a teaching school or research school, whether you are a clinical, visiting, associate, tenured, or instructional, whether you base yourself in Asia or Australia or Europe, Africa, South America, or North America, whether you sic 'em or hook 'em or gig 'em, whether you work on leaves, or stems, or branches, or dive into theoretical roots—when you bring your authentic self, and both give and receive in the community around you—

your work matters,
your contribution matters.
Your LIFE matters.

Turn off the judging.

Embrace the voice of mercy.

Dig in right where you are at.

Keep pursuing the problems that have value to YOU.

Keep doing hard things.

Keep finding joy in your journey.

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