

Learning to Belong: the Best and Hardest Work of Learning Communities

I'd like to tell you a story. I was at an institute on learning communities on my campus, one that we had put on for our graduate students so they'd know all this cool stuff when they go on job interviews ('oh, yeah, well it's all about [fill in from some program titles]'). We had a student panel one night, four students from different LCs on our campus. I knew three of them, but the one woman we had, Laura, was unknown to me. She looked, though, like she belonged in Watauga College. For those of you who might not know Watauga, it's got a lot of aspiring hippies with a dose of grunge. You get the picture? (But as an aside, I just want to say that we have three Eagle Scouts in our freshman class right now, and they always call me ma'am).

So here's this student, barefooted, long, loose-flowing skirt, hair hanging in a less-than-orderly way. And she tells the audience, which I'm in, that she was in the Military Science learning community her first year. Eyes widen around the room, let me tell you. Our MS LC is made up of Army ROTC students who walk our campus in fatigues and can often be seen doing rifle-tossing drills—what is that called? Apparently, ASU has this marvelous squad of rifle-tossers. They win competitions because they toss them so well.

Anyway, she explains that yes, she was in this LC with these ROTCers who planned military careers. She wasn't planning one, though. She went on to talk about the LC classes, which focused on leadership as well as academics. Yes, she was a bit of an outsider. She said, 'I was the only person in the LC who was also a member of High Country Students for Peace and Justice' (tree-huggin', peace-lovin' types, right?) "Yeah," she went on, 'I wore the fatigues on the days I was supposed to. Sometimes I passed by friends from my other life on campus and I would often just avoid them, because I got tired of explaining how I, a theatre major and peace activist, was in the MS LC.'

Time for Q and A comes, and the hands shoot up. 'How did you end up in this LC?'

'I'm not entirely sure. During orientation, my advisor asked me, 'Have you ever considered a career in the military?' 'Well, yeah, I suppose.' I think he heard that differently than I said it. Anyway, I showed up at the start of the semester, and someone handed me a pair of boots and said, here ya go, and there I went.' I caught a glimpse of my colleague Nikki, who's often responsible for placing students in learning communities. She had her hand on her forehead, shaking her head slowly.

'How did the others in the LC treat you?'

'At first, they were a little weirded out. I mean, I'm a theatre major, and most of them had never seen a play. and I dress kind of strange. but after a while, it was fine. They acted like I belonged. And I did.'

'They acted like I belonged, and I did.' What a remarkable statement about the power of learning communities. Somehow, something happened in this linked pair of classes, in these co-curricular activities, that broke down substantial barriers between very different, and typically very unconnected students.

What I'd like to do in our time here today is give you a little bit of developmental and theoretical context for what I think learning communities do that create a sense of

belonging, and then share with you some stories from my own experience that I hope illustrate these points.

I've been influenced in how I think about learning communities by the work of Robert Kegan, a developmental theorist. I'm particularly intrigued by his concepts of the 3rd and 4th orders of consciousness, and how higher education creates a developmental mismatch between students' cognitive abilities and what their professors expect of them.

Let me cover briefly what Kegan means. "Orders of consciousness" refers to forms of "meaning-making," in other words, the ways we make sense of the world. Kegan says there is no meaning in the world apart from what we make of it, and over time, our ways of making meaning change qualitatively. An example I often share with my students is a teddy bear. I ask them, what does a teddy bear represent to an infant?

"It's soft, it's something to grab, or even put in its mouth," they usually respond.

"Right," I say. "It represents a tactile stimulation. What about that same teddy bear to a four-year old who won't go to bed without it?"

"It's comfort, familiarity, security, a friend."

"Exactly. Now imagine that same bear getting packed in a trunk and hauled off, with the microwave, computer, and stereo, to college. What is the bear representing?"

"It's a connection to home, to something safe."

"The bear gets put away for years after college, and then one day, it gets pulled out of a box in an attic, brushed off, and given to that same person's own infant. What does the bear represent at that point?"

"A desire for continuity? Maybe this person wants to give their baby some sense of safety and security?"

Same bear, I remind them. Different meanings. The bear doesn't change, but the person who makes meaning of it does. And Kegan says this happens in fairly predictable ways. Right around late adolescence and into early adulthood, we will often find ourselves in Kegan's third order of consciousness, transitioning (with any luck) to the fourth. Now without going into great detail, let me explain these two specific forms. The third order is one in which we make meaning relying in large part on the help of other, external sources, and it is difficult to get outside these sources and critique them from a personal point of view. These are the students who want to know what others think, and then choose to subscribe to that other's point of view. What's key here is that this construction of knowledge is done in conjunction with others, and pleasing those others is crucial to one's identity. The community, in other words, is the source of authority, and the student is unable to objectively evaluate that authority.

Individuals who are what Kegan would call "fourth order" construct meaning by examining what others have to say, and then considering it from a personal perspective that helps them create a meaning unique to themselves. They may buy into a certain theory, may like the work of a particular scholar, but they have the ability to cast a critical eye on the work, to step outside it and consider it, trusting their own ability to judge the work of another. This is a hallmark of what Baxter Magolda calls "self-authorship," the ability to own one's own construction of meaning. The community is a partner in this construction, but not an authority. So to the student, the community, or the professor, or the classroom, is an object they can thoughtfully evaluate, not a subject in which they themselves are embedded.

So, back to this mismatch: Kegan says that most of our students, especially the younger ones, are third order thinkers, but that our curriculum presupposes fourth order thinking, leaving our young scholars feeling, in Kegan's words, that they are in over their heads.

I have no doubt he's right, and I believe this frustration accounts for a significant attrition among our students, or, less visible but perhaps more insidious, the development of academic habits that inhibit learning. I think many of our students learn to play the game of higher education, jumping through small hoops in classes so they can jump through the larger hoops of requirements and then ultimately jump through the big fat hoop of graduation.

Sound cynical? Well, it would be hard not to, being, as I am, a compulsive reader of every report on the status of, relevance of, impending disaster of higher education that comes out of every association, working group, blue ribbon panel and, heck, even the New York Times' "Education Life" section. I read them all. No one's telling me I should be optimistic.

Which brings me to learning communities. A while back, I was speaking to a group of faculty at a small university in upstate New York. After patiently listening to my presentation on the value of learning communities in terms of recruitment, retention, learning gains, faculty development, student satisfaction, and just about every darn thing I could throw in, an audience member raised his hand. "But really—why should we restructure our curriculum and create new courses and learn new ways of teaching when the world seems pretty satisfied with what we're doing? Our classes are full. Our graduation rate is steady."

Faculty. Gotta love 'em. They will never let you get away without some fast and serious thinking, not when they give you the microphone and 90 minutes of their time. I thought fast and serious, and I said, with as much earnestness as I could muster, "Because learning communities are the antidote to the cynicism that pervades higher education."

I paused and waited for the guffaws, or at least the chuckles. There were none. People actually kind of nodded, like maybe this made sense. Or maybe they were just ready to hear that there is a possible antidote to the cynicism they sometimes feel.

I want to tell you a bit about the residential learning community that I direct, Watauga College, and maybe convince you that there are qualities of Watauga that do indeed respond to the mismatch Kegan describes, which may, in turn, move us beyond that cynicism and teach us something about the sometimes-elusive elegance of our work. And I'd like tell you about some of the students and faculty of Watauga who can attest to both its power and its messiness and this weird way that it both promotes and protects against cynicism.

Watauga College is Appalachian State University's residential college, founded in 1972, one of those "alternative" educational experiments, rooted in the countercultural power of the 1960s. It is essentially a two-year program, with students taking a total of 18 semester hours their freshman year in Watauga (and 12 outside of it), and 6 hours, or two classes in their sophomore year. These courses are small, discussion-focused interdisciplinary classes that fulfill the student's general education requirements in English and History. We are a program within the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, and most of our faculty are tenured within that department, so we have, in essence, our own

faculty. We take 120 freshmen each year, and about 100 of those continue as sophomores and fulfill the 24-semester hour requirement. Some are honors-qualified, others are kind of risky admits for ASU. We fill the program on a first-come, first-served basis, so we get a real mix of academic ability. All of our freshmen live in Appalachian's new Living Learning Center, a residential complex built for Watauga College, which houses classrooms and faculty and administrative offices as well as beds for 312 students (not all of them are Wataugans, but more about that later).

A faculty member from another department recently told a group of Watauga students that "y'all have always been the 'hippie program' on campus, the fringe element, standing around, hugging, singing 'kumbaya.'" Aside from the fact that not a lot of my students know the song "Kumbaya" (it's kind of fallen out of favor at summer camps), he was mostly right. For over 30 years, the faculty and students of Watauga have been engaged in this grand experiment to create a community in which learning happens, to practice the art of learning in a way that enhances community. I guess that could be considered "fringe."

And in my three years as director of this unique program, I've begun to see that what a learning community needs to do, and Watauga does pretty well, is build a bridge between those orders of consciousness, and then guide students across that bridge. In essence, the best learning communities, and I think Watauga is one of them, mediate that mismatch in a pretty amazing way.

Let me explain what I'm thinking when I say "mediate." You all know what the verb means—to resolve or settle differences, to reconcile two different viewpoints. I recently asked someone on our campus who often mediates between co-workers who find themselves in an intractable dispute what it takes to be an effective mediator. She talked at length about trust, that if you don't have the trust of each party, you might as well give up, because nothing other than some very surface agreements will ever happen.

I believe that trust is an absolutely essential quality of the learning relationship because it frees students up to take risks they would otherwise eschew. Consider boarding an airplane. You board with an assumption of trust (I hope) that the pilot knows what she or he is doing, and because of that trust, you are able to relax and enjoy the flight. If that trust is not there, say, perhaps, you watch a staggering pilot walk into the cockpit, or you overhear him or her say to the flight attendant, "Oh boy, oh boy. My first time in a 737! What's this?" you are probably going to be a bit distracted throughout the flight. Well, I think students like to enter a classroom with some trust that the professor knows how to fly the plane, and they can then sit back and enjoy the flight without that distraction.

Learning communities, I believe, engender trust because they provide more connection between students and faculty and among students themselves, and such proximity, such connection, is critical to developing trust. You know the phrase "time-on-task"? I think of this as "time-on-trust." There is no way to build trust without the element of time. And believe me, I've done plenty of those 'trust falls' that are supposed to speed this process. Catching someone falling off a tree stump is great, but it's a lot easier than catching someone as her life is falling apart, or when he is in the throes of a crisis of faith.

Of course, any good professor in any classroom, whether or not it's part of a learning community, can build trust with her or his students. A good professor can

provide a wonderful launching pad for students to take intellectual risks. But learning communities go further, and to understand this, I want to turn for a minute to Sharon Parks' wonderful book, "Big Questions, Worthy Dreams."

I loved this book, and found it provoked in me a lot of hard thinking about the ways we talk about students and their search for meaning. But perhaps the most important idea that Parks presents is that when we discuss "student development" or any human development, really, our default metaphor is the "journey."

Now, I love this metaphor. I love to think of all the possibilities that await students as they travel this complicated road of education. I love the attendant metaphor, suggested by Baxter Magolda, that much of our work is learning to be "good company for the journey." This is a metaphor that truly enriches and encourages my work.

But Parks suggests that development is more than just a journey, that it is a return to a familiar place with a new perspective, like TS Eliot tells us in Little Gidding, "The end of our exploration will be to arrive where we started and know it for the first time." She says we do a disservice to those who seem to not "move on" and assume, incorrectly, that they have not grown very much.

Journey and return. Pilgrimage and homecoming. Parks writes that "Men and women alike know that a good life is composed of both venturing and abiding; a good life and the cultivation of wisdom require a balance of home and pilgrimage."

I think we have the venturing, the pilgrimage, figured out in higher education. God knows we are quite skilled at pushing our fledglings out of the nest at the appropriate times, and if they don't fly, if they plummet to the ground, done in by an inability to wrestle with those threats to their self-concept, to their belief system, we look down, wistfully, and say, "he wasn't ready to be in college." And then we move on. And then a cat comes along and makes a quick snack of our little friend, but that's another metaphor that I won't cover today. But we're not so good at the abiding part, providing a place to come home to. And that is critical, Parks says (and I agree) to a truly powerful education. Parks writes, ".we experience home as a familiar center surrounded by a permeable membrane that makes it possible both to sustain and enlarge our sense of self and other, self and world."

Learning communities like Watauga College, and like many of the ones you are part of, provide, I believe, the other half of that equation—home, plus the half that we take for granted is an important part of higher education—the journey.

Let me give some examples of how, in a learning community like Watauga, we are, and should be, trying to provide both the venturing and the abiding.

On our website, which is how most of our prospective students get to know us, we say that "Watauga College is not for the weak of mind or the faint of heart. No assumption goes unchallenged, no platitude goes unquestioned, no risk goes unnoticed." I think in some ways, it's the tradition of Watauga to dare students to join us. Are you tough enough to have everything you believe up for discussion and debate? And I love this about Watauga. Of course, this speaks to my particular learning style, that I've always been comfortable with the "doubting game" as Peter Elbow calls it, or "separate knowing" as Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule might refer to it. I do think that we fairly portray the kind of intellectual challenge we offer in Watauga, and there may well be students who read that and click the mouse as quickly as they can to find something a

little less threatening. This is especially true, I think, of students considering Appalachian, which is in a Bible Belt state where Christianity is the common context for most thought.

But we do get students, in part because (and this is kind of ironic) we tell them and their parents, “If you join Watauga, there is nowhere to hide. We will know you, we may talk about you, we will knock on your door if you don’t show up when we’re expecting you. If you are seeking the anonymity of a large university, look elsewhere.”

So from the start, we offer them this sort of paradoxical experience—challenge.support.hmmm. I like that. And it gets played out in both the classroom and the residence hall.

How it’s played out in the classroom is probably pretty familiar to a lot of you. You create a safe environment and students are more willing to take risks—will share more, will try out new ideas, will put their beliefs on the table. A learning community, though, does these things in spades. The very fact that faculty and students have enlisted in this effort says something about their willingness to engage on a level perhaps a bit deeper than the standard class experience. It is also an environment where people tend to be known better, in large part because there is more time spent together and because students are known by various people with various points of view about them.

We hold a weekly meeting in Watauga, our “Monday Meeting,” which is actually held on a Friday. Last semester it was Wednesday, but the name is one of those things that, well, it’s a Watauga thing—that wonderful combination of tradition and rebellion. In that meeting, the faculty who are teaching in our core classes, in other words, who between them know every single freshman in our program, meet with me, our associate director (who is also every Wataugan’s academic advisor), and the director of the Living Learning Center. I ask if any of the faculty members are concerned about any student. A name comes up, a student, perhaps, whose performance is dropping off considerably. Another faculty member there, who might have had this student last semester, or has him or her in a “Tangent,” one of our elective courses, contributes a perspective based on experience. The director of the LLC (we call it “the House”) might know something, or might be the best person to respond to the student. Here’s an example: a professor, Betsy, mentions a student in her core class, Grady. She says he’s been missing class, a couple of times sent a student to go wake him up. Another professor who had him last semester says, “gosh, he was fine in my class. He’s really quite bright.” Betsy agrees, and says that she is going to talk with him after class, if he comes. Joe, the director of the House, mentions that he has heard that Grady’s girlfriend broke up with him and he’s been drinking a lot. At the next meeting, I ask Betsy if she talked with him. “Yes,” she tells me, “He told me he’d been in a ‘hole’ lately, but that he was doing better. I noticed that he was wearing a cast on his wrist. I asked him about it and he said he ‘hit a wall.’” The information about his romantic disappointment was helpful in this discussion. Sometimes when a student starts sleeping through class, we assume apathy, or substance abuse. Because Grady was known to be a good student, the first option would have surprised us. The second option was part of it, but the issue was deeper than just a freshman making some poor social choices. He did resume coming to class, Betsy reported, and Joe said he’s not caused any problems in the House due to erratic behavior (I’m not sure what wall he hit, but apparently it wasn’t one of ours, or if it was, it didn’t create the “hole” he found himself in).

Our students are known by several, though usually not all, of us. We see them from various vantage points—what we call our “three-dimensional view”, and we see them, usually, over the course of two years, which allows us to make elongated judgments of them. I think sometimes they really resent this—this “being known” thing (especially if they are engaging in activities they would like us to *not* know about), but more often, I think it gives them some sense of safety and security, of value, because I can say, “I hear you got cast in the Vagina Monologues. How are rehearsals going?” Or a professor can say, “I understand you slept through Kay’s midterm. Are you doing okay?” I’d like to think, and I hope I’m right, that a student who feels that safety in relationship to the classroom and his or her faculty will be the kind of student who is willing to let go of the rope a bit and try on some new and increasingly complex ideas.

Kegan writes that our “evolutionary bridge,” that structure that takes us to the next order of consciousness, must be well-anchored on both ends to provide a student with a path from one side to another. I believe that a learning community with a consistent team of faculty is a heck of a lot more anchored than four or five unconnected faculty across campus, with a resident assistant and resident director thrown in who don’t know those faculty, and maybe an academic advisor in General Studies who doesn’t know any of them at all, and only connects with the faculty member or RA if the student is tanking spectacularly.

And speaking of “tanking,” another way a learning community provides that holding environment in the classroom is to provide standards and hold students to them. A couple of years ago, Watauga implemented what we call our “tough love” policy. You know, Appalachian, like a lot of public universities, doesn’t really have very tough standards in place for freshmen, and you know what happens to some of them: they get busy having fun, fall behind in their work, get overwhelmed right after midterms with how much they have to do, and decide, “I’ll just give up now and have fun, and then start fresh in January.” Except they’re not starting fresh, are they? They have a miserable GPA, which will follow them around like a yapping schnauzer, and maybe will ruin their chances of getting into a particular major or even a graduate school later when they finally catch fire for something academically. And you know, they don’t go down the drain alone, do they? They become very effective at persuading others to tank right along with them, because really, that’s what community is all about.

We thought, heck, we don’t have to sit back and let this happen. Maybe if we tell them that they will be kicked out of Watauga College and, perhaps more importantly, the House, if they can’t achieve a 1.5 minimum that first semester, they might find a way to get it in gear and do the work, and maybe end up with a 2.0 instead of a 1.0. And maybe their friends will actually prod them into doing some of that work, not wanting to lose a member of this tight-knit community (not to mention the best bass player in the hall—~~and I~~ mention we have a lot of musicians in Watauga? And that bass players and drummers are worth their weight in gold, whereas just about everyone can play five Dave Matthews songs on a six-string guitar). This is how I ended up with two students on the couch in my office sharing their concerns about a third student, who was, by all accounts, tanking in a big way. They had told her they were coming to see me about her because they didn’t seem to be getting through to her, and she agreed to let us talk about her. She is wonderful. They love her, I love her, her faculty love her. But she was about to be gone, and they knew it. I told them she owed me a paper for her one-credit hour class with me,

and if I didn't have it by 5, she would fail my class, and well. Let them figure out the rest. At 4:50 that afternoon, an email came from this student, with a paper attached. I later learned that her two friends rode herd on her, literally standing over her while she typed, ignoring her excuses, until they watched her save and send the paper to me. The paper was fine, by the way. This kid totally has it in her to do great work. She just has motivation issues. But apparently, two people who love her standing over her, threatening to tie her to the chair, was motivation enough. She is in class with them. She lives with them. She is involved in several House activities (she's actually our composting guru). They were not going to let her go down without a fight. Now that is a well-anchored bridge. What she learned about friendship and commitment and integrity that day far surpassed anything she learned writing that paper, but I'm okay with that.

Listen to this great idea from Kegan: "A well-schooled culture is a tricky culture. It not only creates environments that are intensely meaningful to the current way its members construct their experience, it also increases the likelihood that interacting with this environment will disturb this very way of constructing reality and promote its transformation" (p. 68). You do that all the time in your learning community classrooms, right? You give your students a connection to you and each other that is intensely meaningful, and then, just when they're getting comfortable, you disturb the bejesus out of them. But because they are in this holding environment, this safe place where they trust you and feel a powerful connection to one another, they don't run screaming from the room (or withdraw from the University—less dramatic I know, but more significant in the big picture).

But what about beyond the classroom? That's an area where I think Watauga excels. The very nature of this anti-authoritarian, kumbaya-singing, yes, okay, occasionally pot-smoking, little pocket of liberalism on campus is enough to make some students freak out. Yes, we attract those classic Watauga students, but we also attract students who are more middle-of-the-road, but are attracted by our promise of small, discussion-oriented classes, close ties to faculty, and, to be honest, the nicest residence hall at Appalachian, maybe anywhere. In a weird twist of fate, we also ended up sharing space with a group of students who are perhaps the least like Wataugans of any student group on campus, with the possible exception of ROTC members.

But first let me give you a little background. When this new Living Learning Center was about to be opened, designed to house Watauga College, it meant that we were about to vacate East Hall, a pit of a place on the other side of campus where Watauga had resided for 25 years, which is about how long it had been since any work was done on the hall. Watauga College and our Department of Housing and Residence Life had existed in a relationship fraught with mistrust and mutual irritation. When I became director in 2001, the first Watauga director not to come from its faculty, and certainly the first one with a background in student affairs and residence life, I began to understand the roots of some of this. In our Watauga classrooms, we were working hard to teach students to question everything they are told or taught, to scrutinize anyone resembling authority, in general, to raise a little intellectual hell. These skills need to be *practiced*. A residence hall is not the best place to practice them. The RAs, who were not Wataugans, didn't appreciate having their authority scrutinized. The Department of Residence Life did not appreciate having its rules, most of which exist for the safety and general well-being of students, ignored or criticized.

So I think the Director of Housing and Residence Life, who is a good man, an experienced professional, and not dumb, looked down the road of his future and saw, because of this brand new building which we intended to turn into a living learning laboratory, a long and arduous series of battles with me as we tried to find a way for Watauga to walk its talk in this place. The proposed solution? I'm pretty sure he said, at some point, "Let's just give them the residence hall. They'll see what it's like to try and manage this end of a residential college." "They" meant the faculty, theoretically, and me, realistically. So now we have our own residence hall, and we hire and supervise our own staff (no RAs, no graduate resident director), our own governance structure, our own budget, etc. I won't get into the details of this, because they sometimes reduce me to tears, but suffice to say it's made for a really interesting three semesters so far.

Okay, so back to the students we share the building with. Watauga is not big enough to fill a 312-bed building, and if we simply allowed Housing to place students in the building who needed beds, we'd then be responsible for students we weren't really responsible for, if that makes sense. Even the addition of 24 international exchange students, which has been great, still left us about 60 students short.

Who has 60 students? Our Teaching Fellows program brings in 60 freshmen each year, selected through a rigorous statewide process. These are students who get basically a full ride at a state university in North Carolina in exchange for a promise to teach for four years in NC public schools. So let me make this clear. These students know, as high school seniors, what their career will be. They make a huge commitment to it. They tend to be students who want to return to their hometowns, teach, get married, have a nice house, kids, a dog. They are the very embodiment of "focus."

Watauga students, it must be said, would not know a "focus" if it hit them in the forehead. "Focus" is suspect. Experimentation is the key to a happy life, eventually. I could talk all afternoon about what it has meant to have these two groups living together (we made the decision to mix them up throughout the building, so they often share suites), because those are great stories about culture and tolerance and stuff like that. But I'm here to talk about learning communities, so this is what I'll say:

Having Teaching Fellows, which until this year was a ten-year old NON-residential, technically non-curricular community of students, has thrown into stark relief how deeply embedded in Watauga the power of a residential learning community truly is. I see this more clearly now than I ever did when we lived in the hovel that is East Hall. And I see how we really do manage to provide students a bridge across which they must walk to become more complex, more mature, more fourth-order thinkers. Here's an example.

We worked for much of last year on developing an in-house judicial process to respond to minor violations (like first-time underage drinking) and violations of community standards, like noise, trash, general disrespect. After weeks of training and discussion, the Community Expectations Circle, or CEC had its first few hearings. The first couple went well, with students accepting responsibility and the proposed sanctions (usually, because we use the model of responsibility and reconciliation, several hours of community service). But the third one involved a group of students who had been caught having a party, with alcohol, in their suite (I should say that in the LLC, our unwritten motto is "we reward discretion, we punish stupidity," and these students had been indiscreet and stupid). The students being sanctioned were petulant, the CEC members

were hurt, and the whole thing got kind of ugly in the days following the hearing. I heard about it in the one-credit class I co-teach, which is called “Housekeeping,” and is essentially a community-building class.

“What exactly is the problem?” I asked them after hearing this topic come up from several of them when discussing “community highs and lows,” which we do at the start of the class.

“The CEC is hypocritical. Some of their members do the same things they were accusing others of.”

“Yeah, and people felt judged. The CEC was being judgmental.”

I almost laughed at the irony of the moment. Instead, I thought about Kegan (okay, not really, but in hindsight it makes sense). “Um, they were being judgmental. That’s how it works in a community. You do something that has negative consequences, and if you get caught, you get judged. That’s pretty much how the whole system of justice works.”

“Yeah, but I just think you shouldn’t be judged for decisions you make. Kind of. I mean, when those decisions aren’t really hurting anyone.” This third order stuff was fascinating to listen to, but I knew that my job was to somehow remind them that we aspire to great things in this, our very own residence hall. The CEC, you see, is a fourth-order kind of structure, asking students, both the CEC members and respondents, to look at behavior more objectively, to remove it from the realm of the personal and see it in the realm of the community.

This sort of thing goes on with most judicial processes on campuses across the country, and students will always complain that they are being made an example of, or being unfairly judged. But most of those conversations and complaints happen in residence hall rooms or over dinner, where they mostly kvetch without anything educational taking place. But the conversation that we had in our residence hall lounge took place in the context of a *learning community*, where they felt a connection to each other, to the greater good of the House, and, I hoped, to me. They assumed, I think, that my investment in this place, and in Watauga, was equal to theirs, and even though they fussed some more, I have to believe that they heard this response in a different way than they might have heard from a campus judicial officer or a graduate resident director they barely knew.

I see examples of this sort of bridging all the time, as I hear faculty talk with students over lunch about House issues (we eat lunch together three times a week in a dining room in the Living Learning Center—which of course has its own set of administrative Tales from the Crypt). I see the faculty member who advises the CEC, along with Joe, the House director, really process the work with this group. I see the faculty member who has taken on the task of watering the plants in the residence hall lobby being complimented by students, and the faculty member who has started a “library club” with several students and is helping them organize hundreds of books that were donated by faculty to our in-house library. I see the way “living” issues in the house spill over into the classroom, and even more often, the way their coursework shows up in the House as they study together, paint murals representing class material, cook dinners with their professors.

I see all of this, and I know that somehow, we have created a place in which they can abide. From there, they can venture. They can take their daily pilgrimage out onto this lonely planet and know that there is a home to which they can return.

Lest you think this kind of work is exclusive to residential learning communities, I assure you it's not. Let's go back to Laura, the student from the Military Science learning community, which is not residential. Against the odds, I think, she found a home, a safe home in that learning community, a place from which she could venture forth onto campus, into the community, and sort out her beliefs. As I listened to her that night, I realized that she had the ability to critically evaluate both communities, and I am sure this is, at least in part, because her place in that learning community was assured. She belonged. The bridge was well-anchored by the structure of the learning community, by the time-on-trust all of those students experienced. That's the beginning of some powerful 4th order meaning-making.

When our students arrived this fall, we had a banner that hung from the House. It said, "Welcome home." We need for them to know that that is the case. They are welcome, and they are home.

How can anyone remain cynical in the face of such a thing? That is the gift of learning communities, when these well-anchored bridges exist in multiple places. They are in the team-taught classroom, when two faculty members disagree with one another but still act civilly, demonstrating that regard for another person can transcend opinions about the world. They are in the late-night study group, a hallmark of a good learning community, when students learn to first confront the slacker in the group and then find a way to restore his or her sense of connection to the group. The well-anchored bridge is what students travel between two different classes, two different disciplines, as they learn that you cannot understand the present war in Iraq without understanding its history of tribal leadership, or the economics of oil in America; you can't understand a great piece of literature without understanding the place and time in which it was written, the cultural experience of the author.

During move-in this year, a few of our upperclass students sat out front at a table, an electric skillet in front of them. From 8:30 am till 4 pm, these four or five guys made grilled cheese-and-tomato sandwiches and handed them out, for free, to new students. Totally their idea. They bought the cheese. One of the students, Adam, had grown the tomatoes in his yard over the summer. I asked them what possessed them to do this. "We want to make sure the freshmen know this isn't just any residence hall. It's a community," said Doug. I ate one, and thought it was the best grilled-cheese-and-tomato sandwich I'd ever tasted. It could have been the special greek-style spice they sprinkled on the bread. Or it could have been the fact that this was more than a sandwich. This was a message for my new students, coming in from outside. It said, "You are crossing a bridge into a community, our community. You'll be known. You'll be nurtured. Welcome home."

