A THEORY OF SELF-AUTHORSHIP DEVELOPMENT

This chapter is aimed primarily at readers who follow studies of college student and adult development, or anyone else interested in the underlying theory, and how it illuminates the stories in this book. It shows the patterns in the participants’ journeys to self-authorship and uncovers how they are shaped by individual personality, background, and experiences. Although the narratives show participants reaching similar destinations, the paths they took vary because of their differences as people and the unique circumstances of their lives. Each person’s way of making sense of the world, themselves, and their relationships with others affected how they approached experiences and how they interpreted those experiences, as did the support systems they had available to face life’s challenges. For some, their personal set of realities (to borrow a phrase from Evan in chapter 7) yielded a fairly straightforward path toward authoring their lives. For others, their personal set of realities resulted in their taking a more roundabout path to that same destination.

A deeper understanding of the phases of the journey toward and through self-authorship and the steps in each phase can help partners provide the challenge and support to enable adults to shift to the internal coordination of their beliefs, identities, and social relations. I use the word elements for the steps to convey that there are certain components, or building blocks, that comprise what developmental psychologist Robert Kegan calls the self-authored system; the term system stems from Kegan’s notion that self-authorship is “the mental
making of an ideology or explicit system of belief.” This system does not emerge full-blown but rather in a gradual, cyclical fashion.

This chapter offers a theory of self-authorship development that emerges from participants’ stories. It offers an overarching storyline of development, and patterns of movement within it—particularly movements in beliefs about the world, oneself, and relationships—how they intertwine in multiple ways across that journey, and how the phases cycle and recur for different participants. It is important to note that this is my construction of this theory, influenced by my study of self-authorship over the years. It is one possible interpretation based on one group of participants (see the methodological appendices for a detailed discussion of this point).

A CYCLICAL OVERARCHING STORYLINE

Participants began to discover the need to develop an internal voice when, in interacting with the external world, they found shortcomings in the values and points of view they had acquired from the authority figures in their lives (the crossroads). Most participants recognized the need to listen to this internal voice to guide decisions regarding their beliefs and values, identity, and social relations soon after graduating from college. Cultivating this voice fully, to stand at the center of how they viewed the world, themselves, and their relations, took substantive effort and time. The stories reveal that the path toward self-authorship is not a steady march forward. Instead, it could be described as two steps forward and one step back or, at times, one step forward and two steps back.

Movement away from the crossroads was halting, as participants extracted themselves from external control only to be sucked back into it. As their internal voices gained strength, it became easier to avoid being pulled back. Dawn’s analogy of learning to walk then being able to run captures the distinction between moving toward a new phase and moving into it. Kurt articulated this recurrent cycling between his awareness of his proclivity to sacrifice his needs to meet those of others, his attempts to stop doing so, and his slipping back despite his intentions. This same back-and-forth motion took place among trusting the internal voice, building an internal foundation, and securing internal commitments.
The storyline starts with participants' movement out of the crossroads—the juncture where external expectations and the internal voice compete for dominance. Next, I describe three elements of self-authorship, followed by movement beyond self-authorship. The map of the journey toward self-authorship, with which you are, by now, familiar, portrays the cyclical nature of this overarching storyline.

The three phases of the journey—Moving Toward Self-Authorship, Building a Self-Authored System, and Moving Beyond Self-Authorship—represent three qualitatively different meaning-making structures. Meaning-making structures refer to the underlying organizing principles of how we make sense of our world. We organize meaning using a particular structure, or rule, until we encounter discrepancies between our structure and reality. As Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget described, we attempt to hold onto our structure for as long as it is feasible, assimilating new experiences into that rule as exceptions. When we can no longer resolve discrepancies this way, we alter the structure enough to get our rule and experience back into balance (see page 3 on how change happens). For example, study participants found using external formulas as a structure during college to be effective. When they encountered problems with these, they first assimilated those experiences into their external formula structure; however, after college, they encountered tensions they could not resolve with external formulas. They then recognized the need to develop their own internal voices and take responsibility for reevaluating the external influences in their lives. This move to the crossroads reflects moving to a new rule or structure. Similarly, Moving Toward Self-Authorship reflects their movement out of the crossroads toward the new structure of Building a Self-Authored System. The underlying principle of that structure is internally determining one's beliefs, identity, and social relations. Moving Beyond Self-Authorship is a new structure characterized by a move toward self-transformation, or the ability to reflect on one's self-authored system.

Moving Toward Self-Authorship

Emergence from the crossroads was a gradual process for my participants. Two distinct elements of this phase of moving toward
self-authorship were evident in the stories: listening to the internal voice and cultivating the internal voice.

**Listening to the Internal Voice.** In this first element, participants’ internal voices edged out external influence as their primary way of seeing the world. I use the phrase “edged out” to convey that the external authority on which participants had relied for most of their lives was still present and influential. They were aware that their internal voices needed to be developed and strengthened to determine their beliefs, establish their internally defined identities, and guide their relationships. Awareness, however, did not automatically translate to action. Participants had to actively work on listening to their new and fragile internal voices. As Dawn and Heather put it, they were trying to hear above the clutter the external world threw at them, to hear above the external noise of daily life. Consistently keeping the newly formed internal voice in the foreground was a challenge for most.

**Cultivating the Internal Voice.** As their internal voices grew stronger, participants were increasingly able to keep them in the foreground in this second element. Their primary focus in this element was cultivating their internal voices. They analyzed their interests, goals, and what made them happy. They began to use their internal voices to make decisions about the direction of their careers and personal lives, and who they wanted to become. They began to critically analyze external influence, as opposed to uncritically accepting external formulas as they had earlier. External influence still pressured their internal voices on some occasions, and sometimes stifled them on others. For example, work and family environments sometimes inhibited participants’ internal voices. Genesse’s story (chapter 1) is a good example of work relationships that inhibited her development. Because she worked for many years for supervisors who did not afford her autonomy, she had a hard time gaining confidence in her internal voice in the work context. The ups and downs of her relationship with her mother over time also mediated her ability to trust her internal voice. Her story reveals that this can be a long struggle and result in an unevenness of the development of the internal voice. Continued relegation of external influence into the background to the point that their internal voices became more dominant prompted participants to shift into a new meaning-making
Building a Self-Authored System

Building an internal voice requires moving the source of one’s beliefs, identity, and social relations “inside” oneself. Thus, the internal voice must be built in all three developmental dimensions (see pages 9 and 10) to yield a self-authored system. This system becomes the lens through which individuals interpret their experience and form their reactions to the external world. Three elements of the phase of building a self-authored system emerged from participants’ stories: learning to trust their internal voices, building an internal foundation, and securing internal commitments. These three components, or building blocks, are what participants used and reused in building a self-authored system.

**Trusting the Internal Voice.** Participants’ key insight in this element was making a distinction between reality and their reaction to it. They recognized that reality, or what happened in the world and their lives, was beyond their control, but their reaction to what happened was within their control. Mark articulated this in chapter 3 when he said he was, “still at the mercy of fate, but I interpret fate, decide what it is going to mean to me and take action in my environment.” Trusting their internal voices heightened their ability to take ownership of how they made meaning of external events. They recognized that they could influence their own emotions and happiness by choosing how to react to reality. This led to a better sense of when to initiate making something happen versus when to let something happen. This way of seeing things enabled them to be more flexible and move around—rather than trying to change—the obstacles they encountered. In chapter 2, Dawn called this the “art of controlling without controlling” and was using this approach to work with her multiple sclerosis (MS). Similarly, Evan noted in chapter 7 that he expected things to go wrong and was satisfied to do what he could to resolve issues. Whereas participants were aware of the need to develop their internal voices in moving toward self-authorship, they now had developed confidence in their internal voices. Thus, they came to have faith in and trust their
internal voices and the internal commitments they were making based on these voices.

In many cases, participants moved from awareness of, to confidence in, their internal voices multiple times as they worked to trust their internal voices in each developmental dimension (i.e., knowing what to believe, who to be, and how to relate to others) and in multiple contexts (e.g., work, personal relationships, parenting). Awareness often prompted exploration, which sometimes led to what Dawn called the shadow lands. These were times of confusion, ambiguity, fear, and even despair as individuals struggled to analyze and reconstruct some aspect of their beliefs, identity, or relationships in various contexts. As Dawn noted, it was not possible to be “in the light” all the time. By reflecting on these challenging experiences, participants emerged from the shadow lands with a clearer vision of themselves and greater confidence in their ability to internally author their lives. Their personal reflection skills and the extent to which they had good support systems influenced the intensity and duration of excursions into the shadow lands. Once they had sufficient confidence to trust their internal voices in multiple dimensions and contexts, participants were able to begin building an enduring internal foundation.

**Building an Internal Foundation.** In the element of trusting their internal voices, participants consciously set about creating a philosophy or framework—an internal foundation—to guide their reactions to reality. They worked to refine their personal, internal authority in determining their beliefs, identity, and relationships. They reflected on how they had organized themselves and their lives, and they had made the necessary rearrangements to align arenas of their lives with their internal voices. This often meant accepting personal abilities or characteristics and incorporating these into their identities, as Dawn did with her gift in cooking. They made additional choices using their internal voices as guides. Their ability to explain how and why they made particular choices gave them the assurance that they could rely on their personally created identity, decision, or relationship, even amid uncertainty. Synthesizing their beliefs, identity, and relationships into one internal foundation yielded what Dawn called the “core of one’s being,” or what Mark called a “truer identity.” These phrases reflect the enduring nature the internal foundation acquires when all of the threads of one’s development become integrated into one entity.
Participants acted according to their internal foundations as they were building them. This often yielded feedback that they used in refining their internal foundations. As they built some parts of the internal foundation in a new dimension or context, they found that they needed to cycle back to the element of trusting their internal voices to gain additional confidence. They returned to strengthen their confidence, while they continued to build other parts of the foundation. Similar to a physical construction project, it is often necessary to return for additional materials or to revise a blueprint to address an unanticipated twist. Cara’s story in chapter 8 offers a good example. Despite her success in extracting herself from external forces in her twenties, Cara faltered when her parents and grandparents expressed their desire for her to have a baby. Although she did not return to the crossroads, she did further reflect on her internal voice to settle for herself where children fit into her vision of her life. Similarly, Dawn revisited her internal voice upon learning of her MS diagnosis. Visits to the shadow lands occurred in this process as well, perhaps because the participants hadn’t fully developed their skills of reflection or lacked good support. Their increased confidence helped them work through painful experiences and use the conclusions they reached to strengthen their internal foundations; however, participants pointed out that initially the beliefs and perspectives they were forming were, as Kurt said, in their heads rather than in their hearts. Mark described this as admiring a set of convictions one has constructed versus living them. While they were building the internal foundation, they perceived that they were beginning to live their convictions. In retrospect, many could identify the transition from admiring to living their convictions that led them to securing internal commitments.

**Securing Internal Commitments.** Participants identified this third element of building a self-authored system as “crossing over” from understanding their internal commitments to living them. Dawn called it crossing over into wisdom. Mark also used the crossing-over metaphor in noting that there came a time when he had no choice but to “cross the bridge” to live his convictions. When the internal foundation became the enduring core of their being, participants felt that living their convictions was as natural and as necessary as breathing. This element was a time of living the internal foundation and securing the internal commitments they had made.
Many participants described inner wisdom as the blurring of their knowledge and their sense of self. Dawn described it as living the facts and absorbing that information into her entire being, which led her to “know” as second nature. Kurt described it as his convictions becoming part of his heart rather than existing only in his head. This merger of knowledge and sense of self seems to reflect not only the bringing inside of personal authority but making personal authority one’s very core. In this element, participants integrated their internal foundations and infrastructure with their external personal realities. Evan referred to this as floating on the waves, accepting that sometimes things were over his head and taking life as it came. Mark’s aspiration for grace in the dance with reality, to be able to work with it instead of fighting it, is a similar notion. Dawn portrayed this as acting and watching what happens with the confidence that she could create something positive. Participants’ increased certainty that things would work out stemmed from knowing becoming second nature. This allowed them to move forward with faith and trust in their internal foundations even when, on the surface, it would be legitimate to question a course of action. Dawn’s riding in the MS 150 bike ride in the summer heat and Lydia’s immediate acceptance of Navy life’s challenges are good examples of participants moving forward with faith and trust.

The certainty that came with living their internal foundations also yielded a greater sense of freedom for participants. They were no longer constrained by fear of things they could not control and trusted that they could make the most of what they could control. They were open to learning about and developing new parts of their self-authored systems, often recognizing contexts in which they needed to refine or develop some aspect of themselves. In these instances, they returned to building that portion of the foundation or, in some cases, recycling back to gaining confidence in that area. Cara captured this in comparing yoga to life: “It’s like life. Go back and forth. You make progress; you come back.” In the securing internal commitments element, the internal foundation became increasingly open to the possibility of further reconstruction because participants had the internal security to see reconstruction as positive and exciting. They accepted new versions of what counted as normal and enjoyed the dynamic process of living their internally authored systems. They were adept, as Lydia and Evan put it, at rolling with whatever came their way.
A Theory of Self-Authorship Development

Trusting the Internal Voice, Building an Internal Foundation, and Securing Internal Commitments appear to be three increasingly complex elements of the meaning-making structure, Building a Self-Authored System. Each element reflects a distinct focus, yet all three are based on the same underlying organizing principle: internally determining one’s beliefs, identity, and social relations. The initial element involves developing the internal voice to use in these decisions. The intermediate element involves using the internal voice actively to build and solidify one’s internal belief system by making internal commitments. The advanced element involves securing internal commitments, thus refining and strengthening the internal system to become the core of one’s existence. The solidification of this structure yields the security to explore more freely and continue personal evolution, and it opens the possibility for moving beyond self-authorship.

Moving Beyond Self-Authorship

Dawn’s story offers a preview into what moving beyond self-authorship might entail. In our twentieth interview (see chapter 2), Dawn shared with me that she had made, and acted on, some bold, risky decisions from the space that she called her essential self. She reported “existing in that space for several days” and was certain that these moves came from the ability to be in that space of her essential self; however, she also reported having trouble staying in that space. She found herself reverting to an old space where she had been previously and wondered how to navigate staying in the new one. My interpretation of Dawn’s story is that although she was still embedded in her internal foundation, she was gaining a new ability to reflect on it or to stand back from it to get a glimpse of it. This reflects developmental movement because it is a shift of what was subject to us (or, in other words, something that is so much a part of us that we cannot see it) to object. When something becomes object, we can stand back from it, see it as a part of ourselves, and reflect on it (see page 3 for more on how change happens). Dawn’s beginning ability to see the “old space” of being embedded in the foundation suggests that it was becoming object. Rather than being embedded totally in her internal foundation, she was on the verge of being able to have a relationship with it that would allow her to further reflect on it.
This is possibly an example of the shift from self-authorship to self-transformation. The ability to transcend the internally self-authored system allows one to reflect on it and, thus, opens one to transformation that leads to recognition of opposites and contradictions and the ability to hold them together. Self-transformation is possible when we recognize that various forms of our selves exist in relationship to each other.

**DIVERSE PATTERNS OF MOVEMENT AND EVOLUTION**

This overarching storyline of participants’ twenties and thirties reflects both a consistent storyline and diverse patterns of movement within it. The consistent storyline can be characterized as moving toward the meaning-making structure of self-authorship, building and solidifying that meaning-making structure, and moving beyond it toward self-transformation. Although this storyline runs through all the participants’ stories, their movement along that path varied widely in terms of which of the three dimensions of development were in the forefront of the journey, the degree to which the journey was cyclical, and the variations they experienced in various phases of the journey.

*Clarification of Misconceptions of Self-Authorship*

The participants’ stories clarify two common misconceptions about self-authorship. First, the cyclical nature of the evolution of self-authorship just described suggests that self-authorship is more complex and nuanced than a simple linear trajectory. Although all the participants moved toward increasing self-authorship, they took numerous paths in this journey based on their personal characteristics, experiences, the challenges they encountered, and the support available to them. Personal characteristics, such as participants’ socialization based on their gender, sexual orientation, faith orientation, race, or ethnicity, predisposed participants to seek particular experiences (e.g., jobs, relationships, travel). These characteristics influenced how they approached experiences they sought and experiences that happened to them, either at a personal level (e.g., relationship struggles, work challenges, health problems) or societal level (e.g., 9/11, the Iraq war). Their meaning making at any given point
affected how they approached experiences and how they interpreted those experiences, as did their particular combination of the beliefs, identity, and relationships. Participants’ work, family, and personal environments offered a range of challenges and support systems to face life’s demands. Evan referred to all these dynamics as a “personal set of realities.” Particular sets of personal realities yielded a complex set of factors that influenced developing self-authorship. For example, Dawn’s sense of spirituality fueled the self-exploration she engaged in through theater and travel. Her coming out in her twenties was a salient experience that enabled her to cast off external expectations to listen to her own voice. MS, relationship struggles, and trying to support herself via theater work presented major challenges in Dawn’s thirties. Her capacity to self-reflect—an interpersonal strength—and her appreciation of multiple perspectives—an epistemological strength—predisposed her to seek out experiences to explore herself and helped her process challenges she encountered. The support of her family, friends, and medical community combined to help her listen to and trust her internal voice. Trusting her own voice, her spirituality, her willingness to continue digging deeper, and her ongoing support from others enabled her to build her internal foundation and return from the shadow lands with greater strength.

Second, self-authorship enhances, rather than constrains, relationships. The longitudinal stories demonstrate that self-authorship refers to shifting the source of one’s beliefs, identity, and social relations from the external world to the internal voice and foundation. Doing so initiates a reframing of relationships that become more authentic because they honor one’s internal commitments. Connections based on these internal commitments result in interdependence in which parties to the relationship act authentically and support each other in doing so. Thus, self-authorship strengthens relationships and enduring ties with the external world. Dawn’s work on her internal foundation enabled her to enter an authentic relationship in her late thirties because she was finally able to bring her internal voice to the relationship. Cara’s ability to listen more openly to others’ ideas and speak what she viewed as truth, regardless of others’ reactions, led to more authentic relationships for her. Kurt’s internal foundation allowed him to engage in authentic relationships at home and work. Some of the stories in chapter 10 also demonstrate this intersection of self-authorship and
connection. The remainder of this chapter explores the diverse pathways toward and through self-authorship.

**Variations on How the Three Dimensions Intertwine**

Perhaps due to individual characteristics or their contexts, many participants had a default dimension; in other words, one of the three developmental dimensions was in the forefront of their developmental journey. If they gained complexity in meaning making in this dimension, it often came into tension with their meaning making in another dimension. This tension, then, sparked growth on the other dimension; thus, their default dimension “led” development. If meaning making in the default dimension lagged substantially behind the others, it made integration of the dimensions and forward movement on the journey difficult. Those for whom the three dimensions evolved together enjoyed a smoother journey than did those who experienced greater gaps among dimensions.

Mark’s story is a good example of the epistemological dimension leading development. He identified with literature in high school, often defining aspects of his identity through novel characters such as William Faulkner’s Joe Christmas and Henry James’s John Marcher. He was enthralled with history, feminism, Marxism, and a variety of other perspectives during college. His intellect was his default mode of operating, as he calculated what classes to take, how to interact with professors, and how to engage his peers. Although he modified his behavior in discussions from tearing apart others’ arguments to building toward other arguments late in college, he still operated on an intellectual plane of logical and rational analysis when he entered law school. The dissatisfaction he encountered there led him to realize that he needed to listen to internal cues. Despite his ability to consider multiple perspectives and weigh relevant evidence in deciding what to believe late in college, he had used rationality at the expense of how he felt. The success he reported from avoiding feelings in the classroom reinforced his rational approach throughout college and into law school.

To address his unhappiness at law school, Mark turned first to his intellectual default. He used a “cost-benefit analysis" to determine whether to propose to Michele and what role he might play as an attorney. Later, he used Tony Robbins’ concept of installing beliefs to create positive emotions that would make him happy.
Recognizing that being intellectually right meant nothing in arguments with his wife, he began to look beyond the intellect. His exploration of what would make him happy and how to sustain his relationship with Michele led him to pursue Chinese philosophy and his spiritual self. This marked his shift to working on meaning making in the identity and relational dimensions. Mark’s evolution in these dimensions did not replace his use of his intellect but rather put it in the context of his overall meaning making. He described it as a knife he could use as appropriate but also something he could let slip from his hand. At this point, he was able to include his own feelings and those of others in weighing evidence to decide what to believe, who to be, and how to interact with others.

Dawn’s story offers an example of the identity dimension taking the lead. Her interest in introspection was evident in college, and her conscious quest to develop her identity was interwoven in her theater work. She was constantly searching for “all the little truths” within her so that she could bring them to characters she played in theater productions. Her identification of her sexual orientation as “out of the mainstream” no doubt influenced this search, as did her MS diagnosis a decade later. Reflecting on her identity, sorting out the essence of herself, and determining what was important to her were routine activities in Dawn’s life, and her intentional work on them aided her increasing complexity in the identity dimension. Her intrapersonal meaning making also supported how she decided what to believe. She often compared new information to what she already knew, deciding if it fit or not and whether to add it to her repertoire. For example, the cooking she took up as a financial measure became an outlet for her creativity. As she learned to cook professionally, she learned what ingredients naturally went together, what substitutions worked, and what a teaspoon of salt looked like in the cup of her hand. Her willingness to look at multiple perspectives, experiment, and handle ambiguity in how she came to know something (the epistemological dimension) all hinged on her growing trust in her core sense of self (the intrapersonal dimension).

Dawn’s story also illustrates that one can move forward on the identity and epistemological dimensions, and yet the relational dimension can lag behind. Dawn told of numerous relationships in which she lost sight of herself—ironic given her focus and attention to refining her sense of self. This extended to losing sight of taking
care of her physical health, which also caused problems in relationships. After a particularly painful breakup, Dawn again descended into the shadow lands to work on parts of herself that she felt needed improvement, mainly allowing herself to be vulnerable emotionally. To address her relational needs, she turned to identity work. Although she trusted her core sense of self to make career and life decisions, she still protected it in relationships. It was not until her late thirties that Dawn was able to translate the complexities she had achieved in the identity and epistemological dimension to the relational dimension. Her motivation to participate in a meaningful significant relationship, her adeptness at self-exploration, and her trust in her core sense of self merged to make this possible.

Kurt’s story illustrates the relational dimension in the foreground of development, although in this case, it complicated movement rather than supported it. Recall Kurt’s insight in his early twenties from the workshops he attended—that he relied on others’ perceptions for his self-worth. He knew instinctively that this was not a good idea, yet he could not immediately stop doing it. Although he articulated being true to the “man in the glass,” he routinely looked beyond the man in the mirror to see what others thought of him. As he reported, he spent the entire decade of his twenties getting in touch with who he was. In the course of doing so, he often sacrificed his own needs to meet those of others. This complicated his finding and succeeding in a career path.

As Kurt moved into management at his workplace, he found himself between supervisors and employees, a difficult place to be for someone who is concerned about others’ perceptions. He had developed a sense of himself and universal principles he wanted to apply in his work. Although he was no longer looking for approval in these relationships, he was still concerned that others recognize his contribution and sometimes defined his worth based on his success at work. Working to support the company and to keep employees from feeling disenfranchised, he built a new set of beliefs about how to manage people that involved helping them think that their ideas were driving company practice. As Kurt was promoted to increasingly responsible positions, he had to give responsibility to his employees to stay afloat. Simultaneously, his internal sense of self was getting stronger, and he came to believe in himself. The combination yielded a significant paradigm shift in his coming to genuinely believe in his employees as decision makers.
In Kurt’s case, his relational development constrained his identity development because to strengthen his internal voice, he had to work against his desire for others’ approval. It also constrained his epistemological development because he struggled to implement his beliefs in the face of others’ disapproval. Once he freed himself of others’ perceptions, in part by trusting his sense of self, he was able to move forward on all three dimensions to engage in more complex professional and work relationships. Having one of these interdependent relationships with his wife, one in which approval was not an issue, helped him along this path. He was able to experience expressing himself authentically and functioning interdependently in this relationship; this increased his confidence that work relationships could take this same form.

Collectively, the stories suggest that one can move along the storyline in one dimension without parallel movement in another until the tension between the two becomes unsustainable. Humans’ interest in being in balance, articulated in detail by Jean Piaget, prompts noticing tension between dimensions and an urge to resolve it. For example, Mark’s recognition that his intellectual calculus was not sufficient for his personal happiness led him to turn to developing his sense of self the way he had his intellect. Similarly, Dawn’s awareness that the interpersonal relationships she wanted required additional intrapersonal complexity led her to work on resolving that tension. This unevenness in the movement on the dimensions accounts for some of the cyclical nature of the journey.

**Personal Variations of the Journey**

Individual characteristics predisposed participants to seek particular experiences (e.g., jobs, relationships, travel) and influenced how they approached those that happened to them either at a personal level or societal level (e.g., 9/11, the Iraq war). Individual characteristics included participants’ socialization based on their gender, sexual orientation, faith orientation, race, or ethnicity. Aspects of their personalities (e.g., Evan’s drive to excel, Dawn’s self-exploration, Lydia’s resilience) also influenced their experiences. Their personal meaning-making structures (e.g., moving toward self-authorship, building a self-authored system), and preferences or styles within meaning-making structures (i.e., separate or connected styles)
reflect another level of individual characteristics. I describe each of
these levels of individual characteristics next using examples from
participants’ stories.

**Personal Characteristics.** Gender socialization affected par-
ticipants’ choices during their twenties and thirties. Alice, a suc-
scessful counselor with a master’s degree, wanted to start a family in
her twenties. She shared her struggle with tension between her
career and having children:

> Honestly, my initial thoughts were “That isn’t fair that I have
to balance because I am the woman; nothing will change for
him. Why should I have to give up what I have worked so hard
for?” Probably six months I felt that.8

Alice and her spouse worked out a balancing act, which was later
complicated by her health, that helped her maintain her professional
and family priorities over the next decade (chapter 8). Cara’s strug-
gle with gender socialization was clear in her dilemma about having
children and her role as a professional woman (chapter 9). These
gender-related issues took energy away from her professional goals.
Many of the women in the study struggled with this issue, as well as
with the choice of staying home with their children. Gender expec-
tations mediated Gavin’s journey (chapter 9) in a slightly different
way. He pursued insurance sales after college despite a longing to go
into education. He was socialized to think that men were to succeed
financially and that education would not yield that success. After a
few years being miserable selling insurance, Gavin returned to
school for a master’s degree and went into teaching. There, he found
his niche working with students with learning challenges.

Dawn’s sexual orientation influenced her journey because it
was, as she put it, “out of the mainstream.” Although she was aware
of it during college, it took a long time to become comfortable going
against societal expectations. As she noted in chapter 2, the need for
inner strength to stand apart from the mainstream helped her
develop confidence. Thus, she attributed part of how she saw things
and how she thought about life to her sexual orientation.

Participants’ faiths or spirituality played a part in their devel-
opmental journeys. As Sandra described in chapter 5, her quest to
serve God through her faith played a major role in her career path
and her personal depression during her twenties and thirties. Dawn’s spirituality (chapter 2) played a powerful role in her quest
to understand her core sense of self. Mark’s notion of spirituality was an important factor in his development of a philosophy that extended beyond how one knows what to believe (chapter 3). Some participants renewed their interest in religious involvement as they worked through their experiences. Al, a family doctor, returned to his Christian roots to focus on things that he found satisfying, such as volunteering or focusing his career on helping others (chapter 1). Rosa turned to her faith to make sense of tragedies in her family, including her sister’s breast cancer and her cousin’s murder (chapter 9). The diverse ways participants interpreted their spirituality influenced their journeys regardless of their particular religious or faith beliefs.

Personality characteristics also affected participants’ journeys. Lydia’s resilience helped her make the most of Navy life and use her various experiences to develop self-authorship (chapter 6). Dawn’s penchant for self-exploration prompted her to see experiences to develop her internal voice and process them in ways that helped her deepen her internal foundation (chapter 2). Evan’s drive to excel enabled him to always be in a learning mode and to push himself to develop further (chapter 7). Lynn’s tendency to view life negatively constrained her development, and she intentionally chose to alter this part of her personality in order to move forward (chapter 8).

Meaning-Making Structures. The meaning-making structures participants used affected the pace and texture of their developmental journeys. For example, those who had enjoyed success using external formulas were surprised and disheartened when these failed to work in life after college. Mark was shocked at his disappointment at law school. Similarly, Gwen, who had lived by the mantra “Plan your work and work your plan, and you’re going to get where you want to go,” found it hard to let go when she realized that this was a lie. Those for whom external formulas had not worked as effectively were more amenable to letting them go. Dawn was willing to let go of external formulas about sexual orientation to embrace her own. Phillip (chapter 1) had entrusted his fate to the process of getting a college degree and getting a good job. When the job did not automatically follow the degree, he lost confidence that he could pursue his dreams. His unhappiness led to letting go of the formula and moving east to try to break into the business he desired. Those who had let go of the external formula in at least one
developmental dimension were more prepared to work on their internal voices having seen some need to do so.

Within the meaning-making structure of building a self-authored system, those who had constructed strong internal foundations found more strength to handle crises than those whose structures were still being built. For example, many participants faced serious health problems—their own or those of their partners or children. Will and Leslie (chapter 9) faced the ultimate crisis with Will’s leukemia and subsequent death. Because both had secured their internal commitments at the time of Will’s diagnosis, they were able, to the extent that anyone could, manage treatment decisions, maintain an authentic relationship, and provide a healthy environment for them and their children to face the inevitable. The strength that stemmed from their internal commitments helped them cope with this tragic situation. In contrast, Genesse desired greater strength as she coped with her husband’s heart condition. Because she was still struggling to trust her internal voice and build her foundation, the possibility of losing her spouse shook her to the core. Although both of these cases reflect intense crises, participants’ coping capacities varied based on how they made meaning of themselves and the world around them.

Patterns or Styles. Participants’ preferences about their meaning making also affect the developmental journey. In the college phase of the study, I identified these preferences as gender-related patterns within participants’ approaches to learning and knowing.10 “Gender-related” conveyed that they were not gender exclusive, but women in the study tended to use relational or connected patterns more than men in the study, who tended to use agentic or separate patterns. Relational-pattern participants listened carefully to information, valued rapport among peers, and appreciated peers sharing perspectives. Agentic-pattern participants expressed themselves through mastering material, debating with their peers, and learning to think independently. The contrast between these two patterns reflects the connected and separate knowing that researchers Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger, and Jill Tarule identified in their study of women.11 They described connected knowers as believers who tend to look for what could be right about a perspective whereas separate knowers are doubters. Connected knowers tend to move “into” others’ knowledge and the subjects they are trying to know,
whereas separate knowers tend to stand back at arm’s length from others’ perspectives and the subjects they are trying to know. These distinctions are also reminiscent of earlier descriptions of the human tendency toward communion (or connection) versus agency (autonomy).12

One of the most valuable insights of the college phase of my longitudinal study was that relational and agentic gender-related patterns were equally complex.13 For example, in absolute knowing, where participants believed knowledge to be certain, two gender-related patterns emerged: receiving and mastering. Receiving-pattern knowers preferred to take in the information, whereas mastery-pattern knowers preferred to practice in order to learn. What students using both patterns shared is an underlying belief that authorities had knowledge, and it was their role to acquire it. Thus, their patterns reflect different preferences within the same meaning-making structure of absolute knowing. Similar relational and agentic patterns emerged in transitional knowing (where knowledge is perceived as sometimes certain and sometimes uncertain) and independent knowing (where most knowledge is perceived as uncertain). For example, relational independent knowers found it easier to listen to others than to themselves, whereas agentic independent knowers found it easier to listen to themselves than to others.

The gender-related patterns evident in absolute, transitional, and independent knowing merged in contextual knowing when participants evaluated relevant evidence to arrive at justifiable beliefs. Those who used relational patterns now found value in standing outside of the context to gain perspective; those who used agentic patterns now found value in moving into the context to gain perspective. Despite this merger, it is still possible to lean toward one or the other style. Developmental psychologist Robert Kegan eloquently articulates the distinction between structure and style and notes that each structure can favor either preference (relational or agentic).14 For example, he suggests that one can be relationally self-authorizing or separately self-authorizing. He described the connected employee as one who

exercises personal authority on behalf of inclusivity, keeping communication lines open for maximum participation and input, preserving connections and surfacing threats to colleagues’ collaborative capacities; personally evaluates employer
expectations and own performance relative to these kinds of priorities.15

In contrast, he described the separate employee as one who exercises personal authority on behalf of advancing or enhancing one’s own position, status, advantage, agenda, mission, or profile; relates to others on behalf of furthering unilateral ends rather than deriving ends out of relationship; personally evaluates employer expectations and own performance relative to these kinds of priorities.16

Both employees are self-authored and evaluate expectations and their performance based on their internally established priorities; however, their stylistic preferences prompt them to generate different priorities. Kurt (chapter 4) is a good example of a connected employee because of his focus on drawing his employees into decision making. He seeks maximum participation and removes obstacles to his employees’ success. He evaluates his performance on how well the team is working to meet the company’s goals. Lindsey, an economist for the federal government, is also relationally self-authorizing (chapter 9). His management style hinges on letting his employees solve problems themselves and supporting them as needed. Lindsey enjoyed digging around in the numbers, so he had to resist helping out at presentations and giving his employees too much support. He held back, or tried to, in the interest of getting them to take ownership for their work. He did this despite the risks involved, which he described:

I always try to let people know where I stand. I think that you lead by example; I put in a lot of hours, and they know that. If something does go wrong, I take the blame, and I handle it from there. If there’s an error, they come to me. We had a relatively large . . . biggest mistake that I’ve ever been around for. It happened to be in an area that I’m responsible for and ironically . . . it happened when I was out sick for four days. On the one hand, there’s a silver lining in every cloud because there was a big error, and it reflected on me because these are people that work for me, but at the same time, people were saying, “If you were here, that wouldn’t have happened.” That’s all good and dandy, but it still did happen, and it reflected on the bureau, and we’re still feeling ramifications from it now. Once you publish the statistics, they’re on the World Wide Web instantaneously, and if there’s an error, you have to issue a
press release to tell the world that you made an error, and it’s exactly how we are. One of the major ways in which we are judged is based on magnitude and number of errors or revisions. It makes it very stressful when you release numbers and you haven’t really had a chance to fully review them. There’s always going to be mistakes, and what you hope is that you catch the big ones, and this was a big one that did not get caught. Whether or not I would have caught it, who knows? It doesn’t really matter at this point.

Lindsey took responsibility for this mistake because he oversees the employees who made it. Rather than blaming them, he focused on how to get them to take more ownership. He also described how he handled encouraging employees to share mistakes with him:

If someone makes a mistake, especially a doozy, I’ll make a very conscious effort to not show any displeasure. I’m not sure that’s necessarily the right angle, but my philosophy is if I jump up and down and scream at this guy who just told me he made a mistake, he’s never going to tell me he made a mistake again. He’ll try to hide it from me. The first thing I tell people when they come to work for me is: “Look, the minute you think you made a mistake, just please tell me, even if you’re not sure. Please tell me as soon as possible, and maybe we can correct it before we publish these numbers.” People will make mistakes, and they may have caught them a day before they get published, but they’re afraid to tell anybody. For that very reason, when they do come to me and say, “I made a mistake,” on the inside, my stomach may have just fell through the floor, but I’ll make a very conscious effort to not have this shocked look on my face and say, “Okay, let’s take a look at it. Let’s see what we have.” And that’s something that I learned from another supervisor of mine, and I think that was a good lesson. Unfortunately, the director doesn’t share my philosophy, and when I have to go to the director, he gets angry, and I can’t blame him ‘cause that reflects on him, too, obviously. So, [it’s] a very fine line in a lot of these management type issues that you have to try to find a happy medium, and it really varies from person to person. Some people need more coaching and guidance than others, and some people are just naturally more independent. These are all things that you try to learn as you go.

Even though Lindsey incurred the wrath of his boss when things went wrong, he maintained his stance that coaching employees to
take ownership of their work and share mistakes with him without penalty was the best approach.

Evan (chapter 7) is a good example of a separate employee because of his focus on getting his part of the job accomplished. He gives full attention to making sure that anything that is his responsibility is taken care of effectively. Although he is friendly with his colleagues and works collaboratively to meet company goals, his primary focus is on completing his assignments effectively. Justin, an elementary school principal, uses this same form of self-authorization. He described his decision-making process in the context of multiple constituents who all wanted something different from him:

I've got fifty people that I work with, and that's just teachers. I have 550 kids and their parents, so it just feels really overwhelming sometimes. It's difficult because you certainly can't please everybody. People have preconceived notions of what kind of person is a principal. It doesn't matter who I am or what I do, I'm the principal, so I'm the evil guy. People don't really give you a chance sometimes. You just have to let it roll off your back. It's just part of the job, so you just do what you feel like you need to do and move on. I value what I do. It's not an easy job. It's not always very fun, but at other times it is. I get a kick out of having a difficult situation turn out okay. I get a real sense of satisfaction out of that. There's a lot of frustration if a bad situation gets worse or doesn't get resolved. Then, I feel kind of self-defeated. It's almost like an art form. One thing that one group of people wants is something that the other group of people do not want, and I get stuck in the middle because both groups of people are demanding different things of me. So, I have to make a decision—what's going to benefit the kids most?—and go with it, and let the chips fall.

Justin's approach is to exercise personal authority on behalf of advancing the mission of the school. He uses what is best for the kids as his criteria for decision making even if constituents disagree with it. He offered an example:

You look at what your goals are and what's going to be best for the kids involved, academically or socially. You look at what the research says and what other people have done, what's worked in the past. You try to combine all those things to make a decision. People throw up roadblocks, they try to sabotage things,
and then other people will support you the whole way. Sometimes, you try to get support for things that you think are good, and you don't get that support because people have their own self-interests in mind. That's the toughest part because it seems like, a lot of the time, people are just really self-interested. If it's inconvenient for them or if a change of routine doesn't benefit them directly somehow in making their life easier, then they won't do it even if it is better for kids. Our PTA is a good example of a group of people who are very supportive and work hard at our school but are really mainly interested in number one, their own kids. They're not really interested in academic achievement of all the kids in our building, like handicapped kids or kids from really low incomes or kids who have a lot of family problems. That's frustrating for me because I feel like we should all be in it together to help everybody in our building. I haven't found out yet how I can change that mindset. Helping kids that are struggling is really going to help the whole school, and that will in turn help their own kids. It's going to change the culture of the school a little bit, and then maybe that year that their own kid starts to struggle a little bit, people will care about them a little bit more.

Although Justin tried to enlist support for his philosophy that helping all kids benefits the whole school, he wasn't optimistic about gaining much support. So, he proceeded to gather information, use it to judge the likelihood of reaching the school's goals, and make decisions despite various constituents' displeasure with him.

**Complexities of Personal Variables.** Socialization, personal characteristics, meaning-making structures, and styles within meaning-making structures all influenced how participants approached their adult lives. Understanding how these factors affect personal and work life helps partners understand the multiple ways people make sense of what to believe, who to become, and how to interact with others. Remaining open to multiple pathways people might take based on their personal set of realities helps partners support these paths.

**Contextual Variations: Holding Environments**

As the stories in chapters 8 and 9 illustrate, the environments in which participants lived and worked enabled them to move forward or held them in place to varying degrees. Robert Kegan called these *holding environments* and described the three functions of a
developmental holding environment as confirmation, contradiction, and continuity. Confirmation provides support for the person’s current meaning making and “holds on” to the person as he or she is. Contradiction challenges the person’s current meaning making and “lets go,” as she or he moves to a new structure. Continuity “stays with” the person as he or she reintegrates the previous self into a new self.\textsuperscript{17} Holding environments that offer all three functions are more effective contexts for development than those that do not. Learning partnerships offer all three functions.

Participants who enjoyed good learning partnerships in multiple dimensions of their lives also had an easier journey than those whose holding environments did not function as learning partnerships and sent inconsistent messages. For example, Kurt’s parents encouraged him to focus on the man in the glass (his internal voice), and they would support him. They respected his thoughts and feelings and invited him to bring his personal authority to his decisions. He also had mentors in the form of supervisors and his management coach, who confirmed him as he was yet invited him to be something more and stayed with him through the change. They respected his thoughts and feelings, helped him work through his experiences, and shared authority and expertise with him as he built his leadership philosophy. His wife provided an authentic partnership in which he could express himself freely, reflecting all of the learning partnership components. In contrast, Cara had less effective holding environments throughout her graduate education, with the exception of one female mentor. Gender socialization also offered a difficult holding environment for her. Her thoughts and feelings were rarely respected, she was not invited to bring her personal authority to her graduate work or personal decisions, and only her mentor engaged in collaborative learning with her. She did have an authentic partnership with her husband that helped her as she worked against the constraints of her other holding environments. His invitation for her to bring herself to their relationship and decisions supported her personal authority and her ability to interdependently work through issues.

Some participants faced holding environments that worked against their growth. Heather’s holding environments actively constrained her ability to develop her internal voice. Her family dynamics and her role as the oldest complicated her listening to her internal voice. Her work supervisors varied in their support of her
internal voice. Her personal relationships with her husband and her friends were active forces against her developing her internal voice. Although she managed to move forward despite these holding environments, it was a far more painful journey than it would have been had she had learning partnerships in which her internal voice would have been supported.

Personal and contextual variations intersect. For example, Mark’s confidence in his internal voice, supported by the effective learning partnerships he enjoyed with his parents and spouse, enabled him to work through ineffective work holding environments without shaking his confidence (chapter 3). In contrast, Anne (chapter 1) reported that one of her work holding environments eroded her confidence to the extent that it affected her personal life. She wanted to become something more, but her colleagues perceived her as an overachiever. Reginald’s (chapter 1) work holding environments made it more difficult for him to develop his internal foundation because they did not confirm him as he was, at a time he was struggling to adjust to his bipolar diagnosis. The myriad of possibilities of personal circumstance, individual characteristics, and multiple holding environments make for a complex set of dynamics that shape developing self-authorship.

THE POTENTIAL OF A CYCLICAL THEORY OF SELF-AUTHORSHIP

The theory of self-authorship I have articulated here reflects a varied and messy path from authority-dependence to and through self-authorship. At first glance, this map of multiple divergent pathways does not readily translate to how educators, employers, parents, partners, friends, and others who support those on this journey might do so more effectively. It certainly does not lead to standard practices that can be applied to all people across contexts. This map of possibilities does, however, illustrate the characteristics of partnerships through which we might authentically engage others in developing their internal voices and foundations.

I attempted to shape this book as a learning partnership. I have used language that conveys respect for your thoughts and feelings. I have shared stories that might help you sort through
your experiences. I hope the stories helped you consider the complexities in your life and how developing personal authority might help meet those challenges. Stories of partnerships model how you can acquire support for your journey, as well as offer support for those of others around you. For those of you who are educators, I hope the tone and style of the book offer a new way to envision working in partnerships with learners to guide their journeys toward self-authorship.

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