

A memoir of co-mentoring: The “we” that is “me”

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Abstract

My academic journey in learning to mentor and be co-mentored involved three rites of passage. In this reflective essay I acknowledge my three most important co-mentors, former dissertation supervisees now colleagues, who helped form the “we” that is me. The first phase coincided with a constraining time in research and supervision. I co-published only a few journal articles and mainly with one mentee. During my second stage in Toronto I experienced a huge increase in co-publication. This was a natural extension of mutually beneficial working relationships and successful defenses. Like a trusted friend, a mentor can guide his or her charges as they set out to discover and realize the potential within them. Our responsive form of learning in partnership enacted a version of collective action among equals. I became a collaborative arts-based-educational researcher-mentor: a hyphenated collection of selves. Now back in Australia, I co-mentor early career academics seeking to publish and use writing as and for their professional development.

Keywords: Mentor, co-mentor, supervision, partnership, writing, arts-based research

Three co-mentors: Three phases

Close to full and final retirement, I adapt this present title from that of a previous book chapter that, somewhat ironically, I single authored in 1993 as “The ‘we’ that is me: Writing as and for development.” It was a contribution to *Searching for Connections, Struggling for Community: Collaborative Research in Teacher Education*, an in-house book of essays that Jean Clandinin had edited for the Among Teachers Community Publishing Group. This collective was based in two Teacher-Researcher Development Centers at the Universities of Alberta and Toronto, Canada.

In this reflective essay I gladly acknowledge the contributions of three of my most important co-mentors. They are muses who taught me how to be a better learning partner: Christine van Halen-Faber, Margie Buttignol, and Carol Mullen, all of whom I refer to by their first names henceforth. They helped form the “we” that is me. From collections of classical myths that they shared with me, I remember how Homer’s Mentor was not just a convenient stand-in for a largely absentee father but rather one of several forms that Pallas Athene assumed in the quest to guide her favorite protégé, the young boy Telemachus.

Putting logic and order to one side for now, I continue to invoke Mnemosyne who was not only the Greek goddess of memory and remembrance but also the mother of the Muses and inventor of language and words. To study the past, especially my own, means submitting to a degree of chaos while retaining belief in the possibility of arriving at greater meaning in time. I have learned from Christine to trust in a strategy of ongoing deferral in the early stages of an inquiry. She taught me to wait for underlying structures to suggest themselves, slowly yielding a clearer picture of or promising shape to an

inquiry. Margie similarly insisted that things have to get messy before they can get better. She shared with me Koortbojian's (1992) description of self-examination or "self-portrayal [as] a complex and contemplative act. The artist's aim [is] often not simply the recording of a likeness, but the depiction of a psychological state or the allegorical representation of abstract ideas. It is a challenge forever renewable" (p. 7). Even as intimate an inquiry as self-depiction can still encompass the allegorical exploration of an abstract idea like mentoring.

Although we never actually met, American psychologist George Kelly (1955) had been an earlier conceptual mentor for me. I know him at one remove through others who did and through reading his work. His monumental exploration of the psychology of personal constructs (PCP) in 1218 pages provided the theoretical conceptualization for my 1979 doctoral dissertation. Kelly's (1969/1979) later essays, including one devoted to the autobiography of his theory, pioneered the use of an even more daring, personal inquiry model. In it he described "an afternoon with the obvious" during the 1930's when directing dissertation students. He proposed that the activities or psychological states of candidates could provide a model for each person as "an inveterate collector of paradigms" (p. 47). The inquirer thus

does not always think logically. Some take this as a serious misfortune. But I doubt that it is. If there is a misfortune, I think it more likely resides in the fact that, so far, the canons of logic have failed to capture all the ingenuities of man [*sic*], and, perhaps, also in the fact that so many men have abandoned their ingenuities in order to think "logically" and responsibly. (p. 114)

After teaching, writing, supervising dissertation candidates, and advising faculty members for over 30 years, I have come to realize something. All along, I have been trying to capture what happens when the range of convenience of Kelly's metaphor of the "person-as-scientist" is extended to include the "person-as-novelist" and, most recently, the teacher-educator-researcher as educational artist. Here I merge Kelly's image of the "person-as-dissertation-supervisee" with that of the collaborating "co-mentor." Just as clients are psychologists, so too mentees can become co-mentors of former mentors. My academic journey in learning to be mentored involved setting out on an unfolding adventure and negotiating three "mythic" rites of passage (Diamond, in press).

Phase 1: "Whoa"

My initiation along a road of trials (Campbell, 1949) occurred from 1973 to 1989 when I was a Lecturer/Senior Lecturer/Associate Dean at the Faculty of Education of the University of Queensland in Australia. I was awarded my PhD there in 1979. The second of my three dissertation supervisors was a psychometrician recently returned from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) that was later amalgamated with the University of Toronto (UT). As a would-be researcher in educational psychology, I was advised to move from words to numbers. I had to learn to re-invent and write about people as subjects, including myself, in the third person. I also learned to make dismissive references to "non-empirical" approaches. The avowed purpose of empirical paths was to avoid the so-called "slippery slope" and to "control" for the distorting influence of personal perspectives and the complications of subjective properties. But, as it later occurred to me, if all the candidate researcher does is follow the positivist trail of his or her supervisor or that of an entrenched paradigm (which the supervisor represents),

the inquiry may collapse into a pointless, forced march and this is especially limiting within a professional faculty like education.

This phase of my academic career coincided with a very constraining and monocultural time in educational research and supervision. During these years I co-published only eight refereed international journal articles, almost all with Jill Borthwick, a former doctoral supervisee and then colleague. But no co-authored book chapter. Caught then in the masculinist, “heroic” trap of single authorship and self-sufficiency, I was led to believe that I should or could depend only on myself. This was my “whoa” stage in learning to mentor and to be mentored. I should add that only the (god) Professor-Head of Department then distributed favors, including the allocation of doctoral supervisions. Mine was taken aback when John Stevenson expressed his desire to have me supervise his dissertation. John and I are now both Professorial Fellows at Griffith University in Australia.

Phase 2: “All Go”

The second phase of my learning to mentor involved my departure from Australia to answer the “call to adventure” in Canada. This rite of separation had me move away from the familiar place and the way that things had always been. This stage in learning to mentor and be co-mentored began in 1991 when I was appointed a Professor at the Centre for Teacher Development at OISE/UT. This was an oasis of creative scholarship that catered for some 1,400 Masters and 800 doctoral candidates who provided a mostly extraordinary pool of professionally experienced, self-motivated, and talented colleagues drawn from North American and even worldwide sources. Not surprisingly, the tradition

at OISE was that the doctoral candidates would specifically invite supervisors to work with them. And there was competition from both sides.

I had the good fortune to begin at OISE by sharing an office with Carol, then a Research Assistant for Michael Connelly. Carol had just completed her Masters dissertation with him based on an arts-based, narrative exploration of her dreams. Luckily for me, she chose to become my first Canadian doctoral supervisee, then a valued colleague, and now an outstandingly productive scholar in her own right. Before retiring in 2006 from Toronto I would experience an almost fivefold increase in opportunities for partnering and mentoring. Powerful, connecting women graduate students taught me that “we” can always achieve more by working collaboratively than by soldiering on in isolation. Publishing together seemed a natural extension of a mutually beneficial working relationship and successful defense. Like a trusted older friend and advisor, a mentor can gently guide his or her charges as they set out on their journey to discover and realize the potential within them.

During that Summer of my career, I was able to co-publish 21 book chapters and 16 refereed international journal articles mainly with Carol, Margie, and Christine. These three academic artists have been the most influential partners (the “we”) in forming the “mentored me.” Again the pattern was one of the talented doctoral supervisee becoming trusted colleague and then generous co-mentor. Carol and I took turns to lead conference presentations and then to convert these into writing projects. Opportunities seemed to open up, as our relationship evolved from that of mentee-mentor to what Carol called “co-mentoring.” We alternated as first author and experimented with replacing the “&” with “=”—much to the chagrin or consternation of some journal editors.

Many of the chapters that Carol and I co-wrote formed the basis of our 1999 book *The Postmodern Educator: Arts-Based Inquiries and Teacher Development*. This was received as a groundbreaking work of 466 pages that appeared as only the one edition. But for me it has stood the test of time. We first provided a rationale for art-based approaches to inquiry and professional development and then highlighted the work of 17 teachers from four countries as they embodied the metaphor of the “teacher-as postmodern-educational-artist.” We also summoned forth our own experiencing of self and each other and so were more fully able to re-search our different aspects and to capture the co-writing experience in a textured, nuanced form.

We used the term *duography*, a jointly authored form of auto-bio-graphy, to describe our experience of learning from and about each other together while developing portraits of self and the other. These reflections provided a special kind of story used to convey something particular while also addressing a general concern. Duography can be understood as a methodological device in human science to make comprehensible some elusive notion—in this instance mentoring and learning in partnership.

In my third or reflective phase, from 2007 to 2010, I am still serving as a professorial fellow at Griffith University in Australia. Here I work with early career academics who want both to publish more successfully and to use writing as and for their professional development. During this, the shortest and final phase of my academic career, I have published two co-authored chapters and am preparing two more papers with Christine.

My inquiry question

Why is it that out of a career total of some 122 book chapters and papers I managed to co-author some 45 works or over a third of my output with others? This is a much more collaborative result than might have been predicted from my individualistic first phase. How was I helped to journey from “me to we”? What did I learn and how was I taught to become a mentor? I delight in returning to our co-authored works, reading them as predictive acts of self-and other-palmistry. Such revisiting is like traveling along both sides of the Möbius strip that has come to symbolize for me the operations of the co-mentoring inquiry mode. While which of us first found reference to the strip is now a mystery for me, I am certain that like so much else its discovery was immediately shared. Experiencing its operations in practice was more developmental for me than reading about how it as a one-sided surface that is constructed from a rectangle by holding one end fixed, rotating the opposite end through 180 degrees, and joining it to the first end.

Whenever we forget that there is always more than one way, the range of inquiry or action that is possible becomes restricted rather than facilitated. Even “empirical,” as I came to realize, originally referred to that which is based on *experience alone* and not just on *a priori* theorizing and measurement. And so I would spend my years at OISE/UT working through the implications of this position while helping to conceptualize and experiment with those “non-empirical” techniques that came to be known as arts-based inquiry. Building on my PCP beginnings I would become a collaborative arts-based-educational researcher-mentor: a community or hyphenated collection of selves. Relying on sociopolitical understandings of conflict, Fine and Sirin (2007) have proposed this theoretical framework to better understand multiple identities or selves in and across

contentious political contexts. Such a perspective (the “we” that is me) helps me reflect on my experience of living in different countries and working within different academic and methodological traditions. A hybridized, reflexive method seems especially appropriate for researching and negotiating the intersections of more fluid, contextual, and emergent forms of identity.

Stories of being mentored

After arriving at OISE/UT I quietly observed how other professors mentored their students. Those most admired or sought after by candidates included Dave Hunt whose Master’s thesis had been supervised by George Kelly and also Michael Connelly who with Jean Clandinin was charting the landscape of narrative inquiry. Over the next 14 years, in the varied capacities of primary supervisor, committee member, and external examiner, I was able to assist with almost 100 doctoral thesis completions.

The educational literature offers few personal or developmental accounts of the mentor-dissertation student relationship. Those that are available reveal the uncertain nature of the collaboration between mentor and mentee, suggesting often by default more promising directions that might be followed for professional development within schooling and academic cultures. Mentoring can launch either a journey of developmental learning or one of crippling disablement. It is developmental when candidates are encouraged to share their research stories and to “manage upwards,” learning to collaborate with and, in turn, teach their supervisors. (This is my experience of working over time with Carol.) Mentoring is problematic when grounded, for example, in the mentor’s own previously unhappy or even traumatic dissertation experience; the supervision style that is learned may subsequently prove unhelpful, straining later

mentor–mentee relationships. My good luck was to have intuited that there had to be an alternative set of practices that student guides then helped me to explore.

In chapter 11 titled ‘Roped Together’: Artistic Forms of Co-mentoring in Higher Education” of our 1999 book, Carol and I proposed that a joint inquiry, when expressed and examined, has a value in addition to the personal and the immediate. We crafted this writing in the form of a “duography” to unpack the dynamics of co-mentorship and collaborative inquiry. As two separate faculty members who had previously shared a dissertation advisor-graduate student relationship, we reflected on our lived experience of mentorship and co-authorship. *Duography* provided a collaborative form of inquiry in which two individuals could reflect on their lived experiences through responding to each other’s stories. As a co-author, each then acted as a knowing participant in the other’s development. Through conversation, co-writing, and playing off the metaphors that arose, Carol and I participated in each other’s journey to practice and understand arts-based mentorship.

We conjured up the dangers of trying new things alone by beginning our chapter with the menacing image taken from Hemingway’s (1987) short story:

Kilimanjaro is a snow-covered mountain and is said to be the highest mountain in Africa. Its western summit is called the House of God. Close to the western summit there is the dried and frozen carcass of a leopard. No one has explained what the leopard was seeking at that altitude. (p. 39)

We then cited the mountaineering image that Braque used to celebrate his collegial relationship with Picasso: “roped together” in a world of their own. Carol and I always tried to accept and respond to each other’s ideas, feelings, and expressions as positively

as possible. We talked openly about any frictions and irritations—and encouraged each other to persevere. Like hermeneutic helpers, we helped forge new combinations in each other's reflective accounts.

As two people working together to create new meaning, our duography emerged as a narrative or relational form of knowing. We found that the form helped us to craft and reconsider our stories of intellectual and friendship formation. It provided a special kind of conversation between us as co-travelers who imagined each other into the personal and academic writing spaces that were built around the co-mentoring experience that we were sharing. Echoing Hannah Arendt (1990), we believe that duography allowed us to practice a version of freedom that was synonymous with collective action among equals.

By talking about what is between them, it becomes ever more common to them.

It gains not only in its specific articulateness, but develops and expands and finally, in the course of time and life, begins to constitute a world of its own which is shared in friendship. (p. 82)

Like other artistic collaborators, we considered our relationship and work together as an act of engagement that was person-centered and critical. By critical we meant that our identities (as teacher-educator-researcher co-mentors) were not left as prey to superficial stereotypes, and that mechanisms and processes could be established to allow more sensitive, complex, and problematized identities to emerge gradually. Our engagement was meant to be about empowerment. In that sense it was as much a political as it was an artistic statement.

The need for a more responsive form of mentoring in higher education and teacher development is also confirmed by many the “horror” stories of indifference and even abrogation of responsibility that circulate through academe (see the previous metaphors of the carcass and following of sharks). I remember working with a Master’s student who had wandered into a dead end echoing with the contradictory exhortations of three supervisors and five external examiners. Although in different countries for much of the time, we exchanged over 80 electronic messages and successive drafts before her safe passage was assured. Traditional supervision seldom seems to allow for such a frank but personal relationship and a spirit of collaborative inquiry. Her dissertation experience, like that of many candidates, seemed shot through with conflicts that arose out of cross-purposes and competing demands. Some candidates suffer through power plays, even involving the spectacle of greater and lesser “sharks” and feeding frenzies (Mullen & Dalton, 1996). For some, the dissertation experience provides the last act in the drama or the final blow of a “blood sport.”

Despite my objections, Margie designated me as one of her “helpers” and saw me as retaining my so-called Merlin-like position even when I was not actually writing with her (Buttignol & Diamond, 2003). The legendary Merlin wore many hats: wizard or sorcerer, prophet, bard, adviser, and tutor. Margie wrote movingly about having her attempt to enter academe as a tenure-stream professor repulsed. All along the way she recalled meeting both protective helpers and wily tempters. But how could she have known which from which? Who would be her “mystagogues” (Campbell, 1949) or guides to help carry her spirit forward? Although protective helpers may sometimes appear off-putting when first encountered, they prove over time to help consistently expand faculty members’ powers and so renew their

inquiries. Ultimately, however, even more taxing are those jinns of temptation who initially appear in an appealing guise to deceive the unwary.

Jinns are the negative opposite of jewel-like mentors. They are like the haunting demons of the desert wilderness and are “very dangerous to unprotected persons” (Campbell, 1949, p. 74). They often have the power of assuming any form they choose, even that of an apparent guide. Jinns smile but do not reveal their jaws as they beguile their prey. They will, however, seek to ensure that their charges neither move forward nor become their own persons. They may confuse the inexperienced with contradictory advice so as to sabotage any chances of success. Tempters may try to convince them to maintain the status quo even though they may have already taken the first steps on a new journey. Although motives may vary and are not to be judged, growth depends on challenging the power of others over us. Margie kindly credited me as her Merlin, helping her to devise arts-based strategies (including collage, metaphors, archetypes, and literary forms) as charms to safeguard her passage and thereby illuminate the inquiry path.

The “weaker” voices of dissertation candidates, limited contractual instructors, and early career faculty members may be at risk of being ignored or subverted because of unyielding authority relations and power structures. Even though senior faculty mentors may claim to work in “symbiotic relationship” with their graduate students (who are often themselves experienced teachers or professors in preparation), some may still consider themselves superior in terms of understanding issues, problems, and established courses of action, and in intellectual leadership. They may use the rope to restrain rather than to support others.

Carol and I interwove our chapter 11 from the 1999 book with a series of arts-based opportunities. The three examples that follow invited candidates to explore how they were initially received, how they might emulate or surpass their mentors, and what form of political action they might take.

A candidate (from *candidatus*, Latin for white-robed) is a person preparing for an examination or offering him or herself for office. Both are seeking to join a system. Tell the story of your first day in graduate school or in a preservice program learning to become a teacher. Did you feel ignored and degraded, or, alternatively, special and privileged, or something else? How could you have been even better helped and prepared? (p. 321)

In Hesse's (1990) last novel *The Glass Bead Game*, the students are required to submit a fictitious life story set in any past period the writers may choose.

Through writing these lives, they are to learn to regard their own persons as masks. What mentors or supervisors are you learning to emulate or to outgrow? How can you adapt or put aside their borrowed or imposed masks? In his novel, Hesse parodies ... the grave scholarly attitude. (p. 335)

Draw up a list of rights and responsibilities for dissertation candidates and their supervisors, or for beginning teachers in their first year of professional preparation and their supervising or associate teachers in the schools. (p. 335)

My work with Carol thus involved each of us in telling our own research stories and in responding to those of the other. As we sought to relate our different texts, the works became an allegory of our experience of empathic mirroring.

Phase 3: The return

My third stage involved the return or “taking the treasure home” to Australia. As an experienced supervisor, I am supposed now to carry the “keys for unlocking the whole realm of the desired and feared adventure of the discovery of self. [Hopefully this may lead to] a wonderful reconstruction of a bolder ... [and] more spacious, and fully human life” (Campbell, 1949, p. 8), including a fresh release of power and imagination.

Currently as a Professorial Fellow at Griffith University, I am seeking to develop the art of helping others to learn how to publish and mentor. In this age of acronyms, amalgamations, and accountability, I try to provide research support for the Faculty of Education staff. It seems that every Curriculum Vitae has to be kept cocked and fully prepared to take aim at targets set by government functionaries. Once again I am confronted by agents of surveillance, vigilant gatekeepers and eagle-eyed watchers of established boundaries. Such authorities of delimitation often seek to privilege their discourse as above dialogue, even claiming taboo status for it. Bowing to increasing levels of intensification, some recruited “tempters” question whether arts-based narrative inquiry (see Diamond, 2006) can ever really be counted as research, dismissing it as no more than autobiography! I wonder what they would make of something written in the form of a fable or myth, the most ancient forms for constituting knowledge? The latter provides a traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the worldview of a culture or to explain a practice or belief in something like the

responsibility of more experienced members to mentor those entrusted to their care.

Despite overblown claims, science is only a species of the genus of research and not vice versa. So too supervision/mentoring is a species of collaborative learning that is reciprocal, mutual, and supportive and beyond control and compliance. Despite the annual reviews and daily difficulties, universities only exist, as they have since the 11th century in Europe, to generate knowledge through staff pursuing research and presenting their findings by teaching and mentoring others (van Halen-Faber & Diamond, 2009).

As a “critical friend,” I offer several forms of support for staff, encouraging them to “think smart or with ingenuity.” I provide advice on “how to get published” by converting conference papers into journal articles, returning emailed drafts and then negotiating any changes during onsite visits. I also act as a writing shepherd as faculty members prepare applications for government funding and other grants, especially those that are qualitative and arts-based. After I elicit the proposals, I comment in detail with suggestions and we meet to process the changes.

I aim to foster a collaborative inquiry culture by working with supervisors (individually and in groups) to mentor cohorts and identity groups of dissertation students. I provide copies of exemplary theses (including those completed by Carol, Margie, and Christine) as case studies for faculty and students. This helps them see what qualitative, arts-based approaches to educational research look like in writing practice.

I also act as a conceptual helper by leading workshop conversations, opening higher degree conferences (see Diamond, 2009), and making presentations based on different qualitative research styles, including aesthetic forms of self-study and professional development. I pre-circulate the text and visuals of a chapter—such as on the

history of educational research (van Halen-Faber & Diamond, 2009) or like chapter 11 from my 1999 book with Carol on arts-based narrative inquiry and teacher development—for discussion and comment.

I also provide theoretical support for course development by raising the prospect of post-reconceptualist (postmodern) approaches to curriculum and inquiry. This support helps faculty to reconstrue foundational courses and design institutes for promoting teacher (educator) development. I seek to extend areas of inquiry so as to view education and inquiry through aesthetic lenses. Such research deploys a variety of arts-informed methodologies to evoke and represent experience and understandings of educationally relevant issues such as supervision that takes the form of mentoring. These strategies include a multi-modal mix of genres including situated mini-narratives, fiction, (auto)biography or (my)stories, institutional ethnography, poetry, drama, dance, music, and visual art forms such as palimpsest that involves the interplay of different perspectives. These are laid side by side or top to bottom up against one another in juxtaposition. I canvas and welcome suggestions from staff as to how best to act as a mentor who provides support for those who are under pressure to become ever more research active and accountable.

Forever renewable

My indulgence here, if you will, has been to attempt a personal or allegorical representation of the much valorized but still largely abstract idea of doctoral and collegial mentoring. Even as a poet or novelist seeks to grasp the “essence” of some experience in literary form, so too as an arts-based researcher I have been seeking to grasp the “core” of the experience of co-mentoring by providing a series of descriptions

or story excerpts. “A genuine artistic expression transcends the experiential world in an act of reflective existence. In other words, the artist recreates experiences by transcending them” (van Manen, 1990/1992, p. 97). In this essay I have attempted to craft a memoir of co-mentoring based on arts-based reflections. Re-imagining a career is like “loosening” or dreaming in that it “releases facts, long taken as self-evident, from their rigid conceptual moorings. Once so freed, they may be seen in new aspects hitherto unsuspected” (Kelly, 1955, p. 1033). The “facts” that I have seeking to free relate to my experience of working with less traditional forms of mentoring.

In this re-imagining of co-mentoring, I have cited Carol, Margie, Christine, George, and others—even myself. I feel qualified to give such a self-recital because I experienced the events and “I can at least write about what I now recall” (Kelly, 1969, p. 46). Each teacher-educator-researcher's lifelong task is to continue to search for his or her own way and to form a self-constituted set of ever-renewable understandings. By sharing and even publishing my own “make-believe,” I hope to encourage others to find new ways in which to create and explore richer forms of mentoring and development. But not all stories end well.

The alternative, somewhat “intense” form of co-mentoring and co-development that I have enjoyed with Carol, Margie, and Christine may not be for everybody. There will always be a matter of fit and happenstance that cannot be mandated. Why was it, for example, that only these 3 out of the 20 or so former candidates/colleagues that I published with chose to continue to work closely with me? Nor can I claim to have been on some quest, inexorably progressing from one successful collaboration to another, culminating in some smoothed Hollywood ending involving total transcendence. While

my second phase at OISE/UT (then a dedicated graduate school without preservice demands) may seem to have been an especially generative and hyphenated one for me, the earlier stage was taken up with establishing my teacher-educator-researcher self, including the struggle to find a mentor for my own PhD program.

Few escape unscathed in academe as Margie can attest. Yet she has still generously described my work with her as like that of Merlin: a dissolver of mists who helped her dispel the spell of would-be tempters (Buttignol & Diamond, 2003). But even Merlin was captivated first by an enchantress who sealed him in a tomb and later by the mysterious *Lady of the Lake* who entangled him in an old oak tree. Both were former apprentices who stole their magic from him until their power outgrew his. Things may not always be what they seem. As the legend goes, Merlin still sleeps. Though he imagines that he stands ready to help and that his voice may be sometimes heard, he too awaits the rescue rope. So often (and here) only a sensitive writing partner has been able to catch my drift and free my intention. I always have to struggle to break the spell of silence.

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This invited essay was critiqued and reviewed internally, and revised accordingly.

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