Journal of the Association for Communication Administration
Volume 38, #2, Summer-Fall 2019, pp. 69–87

"Let Me Walk With You": Communicative Coaching and Communication Administration at the Crossroads

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Communication administration today is at a crossroads, contending with an unprecedented set of pressures and challenges. This essay explores how the emerging field of coaching might speak to this time. Drawing from the practices and standards of the International Coaching Federation (ICF), the coaching literature, and communication ethics scholarship, this essay frames a uniquely communicative approach to coaching practice. After describing communicative coaching in terms of the goods that it protects and promotes (Arnett, Fritz, & Bell, 2009), it discusses how communicative coaching can sustain the goods of productivity, place, persons, and professionalism (Fritz, 2013) within the context of the academic home (Arnett, 1992) and reflects on how coaching can contribute to communication administration as a collective endeavor of acknowledgement, accompaniment, and humanity.

Higher education is in a moment of profound transition affecting communication students, professors, and administrators alike. Students at all levels struggle with crushing levels of debt, uncertain employment prospects, and increasingly charged and even toxic campus cultures, as well as a whole host of external uncertainties and stresses arising from swiftly moving and even unprecedented changes in the political, cultural, economic, and natural environment. The increasing pressure on students, combined with widespread critiques of the liberal arts and steep funding cuts at public universities, has led to sharp declines in humanities and social science programs as students spend their scarce resources on programs that appear to promise a stronger return on investment. A recent compilation of pieces from the *Chronicle Review* on the status of the English departments put the matter starkly: The liberal arts are in an "endgame" ("Endgame," 2020).

The declines in liberal arts programs reflect much deeper, existential changes to the higher education marketplace itself, in which as many as half of all of the United States' colleges and universities are projected to close over the next decade due to adverse demographics, changes in students' needs and expectations, and competition from free and low cost online education (Lederman, 2017). This prognosis, already difficult in normal times, may accelerate and intensify should the American economy move into recession, especially given the unprecedented upheavals created by the 2020 coronavirus outbreak (Desai, 2020). Even as colleges move swiftly to cut costs and adopt entrepreneurial operating models, these structural changes make it difficult, and at times even impossible, for administrators and faculty to respond to the difficulties their students are experiencing. The context of communication administration is thus one of constant change and uncertainty, in which all of the guiding assumptions and social contracts are being rewritten under our feet. How can we form leaders—students, faculty, and administrators—and institutions of character in this moment of uncertainty?

This essay explores that question from the perspective of the field of *coaching*, which arose in the last decades of the twentieth century out of a need to help people live purposeful lives together in complex times (Berger & Johnson, 2015; Berger & Fitzgerald, 2019; Ross, 2019). In the following pages, I draw from communication ethics scholarship to explore what coaching might mean within the administrative environment of communication departments in colleges and universities in transition. After providing an overview of coaching grounded in

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the practices and standards of the International Coaching Federation (ICF), the coaching literature, and communication ethics scholarship, I propose a vision of *communicative coaching* grounded in six goods that its practice must protect and promote (Arnett, Fritz, & Bell, 2009). Then, drawing from Arnett's (1992) work on dialogic education and Fritz's (2013) conception of professional civility, I suggest how coaching might fit within the context of communication administration as both an interpersonal ethical praxis and an approach to curricular development. In the process, I hope to show the power of coaching in forming students, faculty, and administrators in precarious times.

Framing Communicative Coaching

What does it mean to "coach" another? The notion of coaching brings up a variety of connotations, from athletic trainers with the mien of drill sergeants to New Age gurus to the proliferating ranks of self-optimization and self-branding "experts" capitalizing on an increasingly anxious workforce (Lair, Sullivan, & Cheney, 2005). Yet, the roots of coaching run much deeper. As Brock (2019) and Ross (2019) have remarked, the word "coach" derives from the name of the Hungarian town of Kocs, which in the sixteenth century was a center for the production of horse-drawn carriages. Although the connotations of the word have expanded over time, Ross contended that the word's humble origins contain the essence of coaching: "A coach facilitates another's journey from where that person is in present time to where he or she desires to be in the future" (p. 5). In this sense, coaching, at its core, is a practice designed to help people in transition find their path. Framed in this way, we can see that although "coaching" may sound exotic and, for some, even problematic, it is not that far from the teaching, advising, and mentoring that professors and administrators already do, especially at liberal arts colleges where students lean heavily on their professors for guidance as they make their way into adulthood (Scott, 2007; Woods, Badzinski, Fritz, & Yeates, 2012; Maier, 2014). We can understand coaching, then, as a practice that builds a specific kind of interpersonal relationship that fosters the human and professional development of another.

These types of relationships have become increasingly important over the past several decades as major life transitions have become ever more complex, painful, and common. As Grint (2010) has argued, contemporary society must contend with an increasing proliferation of *wicked problems* defined by their ambiguity, incorrigible complexity, and painful intractability. In such a risk society (Beck, 1992), the wisdom acquired through ordinary professional and personal socialization not only no longer suffices but also prompts scorn and reprisal (Coughlin, 2015). We see this everyday on college campuses. Today, students must choose majors and professional pathways with the full knowledge that these pathways may have vanished by the time they graduate, non-tenure track faculty wonder whether academia has a place for them, tenured faculty mourn the loss of their disciplinary homes and declining prospects for advancement, and administrators wonder whether they can ever keep pace with an ever-worsening institutional environment. While cynicism may be a logical response to this situation (Arnett & Arneson, 1999), the benefits of such a stance can quickly fade. We cannot slow the pace of change, no matter how frustrated we get. But we *can* learn to adapt to its complexity (Kegan & Lahey, 2009; Argyris & Schön, 1999) by developing habits of thinking and acting that can help us grow to meet it (Berger & Johnson, 2015; Berger & Fitzgerald, 2019). This is precisely the sort of learning coaching attempts to cultivate.

Coaching is home to many approaches and schools of thought, some of which are more helpful than others. By far, however, the most important—and theoretically rigorous and empirically validated—approach is that of the International Coaching Federation (ICF).

According to the ICF (n.d.), coaching can be understood "as partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential." Understanding coaching as a thought-provoking, creative, inspirational partnership is essential to differentiate coaching from advising, mentoring, or consulting. When I am advising a student, I am offering them the answers I know to give. When I am mentoring a colleague, I am attempting to guide them to where I have already been. When I am consulting with an administrator, I am telling them what to do based on my expertise. But what if my answers do not match the questions my student is asking? What if my colleague does not want to become a younger version of me? What if the administrator is facing a problem that defies *all* expertise? As Grint (2010) has contended, answer-rich practices like advising, mentoring, and consulting are entirely appropriate for stable environments and the tame problems that they produce. But in a world of wicked problems, deploying my accumulated wisdom and good intentions in this way quickly creates defensiveness that inhibits growth. This realization reflects an important insight that runs through McKee, Boyatzis, and Johnston (2008), Kegan and Lahey (2009), Kimsey-House and Kimsey-House (2011), Lasley, Kellogg, Michaels, and Brown (2015), Frisch, Lee, Metzger, Robinson, and Rosemarin (2012), and, indeed, virtually all of the coaching literature: *The vast majority of problems faced by people in transition are not technical problems to be solved by expertise but human problems grounded in how they adapt to change and relate to themselves and to others.*

The problem with relying on expertise lies not with my intent or with the knowledge that I have to offer but with the center of the conversation. In advising, mentoring, and consulting, the conversation begins and ends with *me* and *my* capabilities, the *answers* I have at my disposal, and the *problems* that I feel most comfortable solving. Where my answers falter, my helpfulness ends. What is more, Kimsey-House and Kimsey-House (2011), Lasley et al. (2015), and Frisch, et al. (2012) have argued that all too often, expertise tempts coaches to solve "problems" the other does not have or speak over deeper issues the other is facing. A student wanting to become more disciplined in writing their dissertation may actually be struggling with worries about entering the academic job market, a new professor dealing with confidence in the classroom may also be dealing with the stresses coming from being one of the few Black faculty members on campus, and a chairperson fretting about low enrollments may also be struggling with adverse campus politics. Coaching the problem instead of the person misses these fundamental issues.

But more important, jumping in and telling the other what to do is a form of existential robbery. It makes me feel good by "helping" but does nothing to help the other learn to help themselves. Here, my good intentions emerge from my pride, not concern for the other, and my solicitude quickly becomes what Schein (2009) has called *unhelpful help* that does more harm than good. "Giving the right answer may serve in the short run, but in the long run, we've done nothing to help the person we're coaching to grow," Lasley et al. (2015) observed. "People feel far more empowered when given the opportunity to access their own answers" (p. 23). By stepping back, coaches give the people they are accompanying the space to grow into their lives. And because each person is unique, they will grow differently with an ingenuity and creativity that would have been lost had the coach attempted to solve their problems for them out of a misguided sense of self-importance or anxiety about not knowing what to do.

Coaching, then, proceeds by re-centering the conversation on the *other* and *their* capabilities, the *questions* this conversation opens, and the *relationship* that empowers the other to meet the problems they face. For Kimsey-House and Kimsey-House (2011) and Lasley et al. (2015), placing the other at the center of their own development is truly what sets coaching apart. Where advising, mentoring, and consulting help the other get to a place I have already

been, coaching helps them get to where *no one* has ever been. Instead of asking students, colleagues, or administrators to follow *me*, I as a coach follow *them*, confident that their resourcefulness, strength, and wisdom are more than enough to guide us to where they are meant to be. Coaching thus begins from a place of humility and courage. Accepting they do not have all of the answers—and even bracketing some of the answers they do have—coaches trust the other to lead the way through an unknown land. The words of the fox in Saint-Exupéry's (1995) *The Little Prince* come to mind: "It is only with one's heart that one can see clearly. What is essential is invisible to the eye" (p. 82). Championing the invisible, coaching helps the other develop the sense of mastery and response-ability that comes from finding their own way in the world.

Engaging the other in this way takes coaching on a path that is substantially different from psychotherapy. To be sure, the influence of psychology on coaching is strong. Williams (2006, 2007), Lasley et al. (2015), and Brock (2019) have all observed the deep and abiding influence of figures like Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, Rollo May, and Carl Jung on coaching, as well as areas like action science, emotional intelligence, positive psychology, appreciative inquiry, neuro-linguistic programming, and developmental psychology. Yet, as Williams (2006, 2007) argued, those seeking coaching differ significantly from psychotherapy clients in the types of problems they are encountering and their ability to meet those problems. Although people seeking coaching may be dealing with anger and frustration over setbacks, feeling sadness about a particular turn of events, working through stress and anxiety, or recovering from a traumatic event, these issues are not overwhelming them, inhibiting their everyday life, or putting them at risk of harming themselves or others. While coaching is often a helpful complement to psychotherapy, Williams emphasized that it never replaces it—and that coaching practice must strive to keep this line bright and clear.

Beyond the differences in the issues it addresses, coaching also differs from therapy in how it is practiced. As Williams (2006, 2007), Lasley et al. (2015), and Kimsey-House and Kimsey-House (2011) have contended, coaching shifts from a worldview defined by pathologies and deficiencies to a world defined by resources and potentialities. Coaches, in other words, do not spend their time dredging up painful memories, although the past can appear spontaneously and briefly during a session, nor do they seek to render diagnoses or find patterns of causation for what "ails" the other (Williams, 2006, 2007). Believing that persons already possess everything they need to confront the challenges they face, coaches help the other learn to see the potential in the present, define a vision for the future, and take the first steps on that journey. "Instead of analyzing the past, coaching looks forward to create a deeper engagement with the present and a more desirable future," Lasley et al. wrote. "Coaching is primarily for expanding awareness and designing actions that move people toward the fulfillment of their life purpose, dreams and goals" (p. 4). Or to put it differently, coaching works in a Socratic fashion, seeking to help people *remember* the strengths, skills, interests, and values that they may have forgotten (Plato, 1976) and *re-member* them in a way that is inherently positive, affirming, empowering, and transformative (Palmer, 2004; Williams, 2007).

This notion of *transformation* is core to the coaching literature, a belief that connects human flourishing to a life of constant learning and growth. "Humans have the potential and deep desire to learn, grow, and evolve," Lasley et al. (2015) wrote. "Transformation is a process of profound and radical change that arises from deep awareness and leads to fresh orientation and new direction" (p. 5). Within the coaching literature, such transformations are possible for anyone. Based on decades of research in adult development, Kegan and Lahey (2009) and Berger (2012) have emphasized that the common assumption that people stop growing

following adolescence is completely incorrect. People can and do grow throughout their lives, not just by assimilating new skills but also by developing broader and richer forms of mind that allow them to understand and respond to the world in new ways. While young children and a few adults possess a *self-sovereign mind* that cannot imagine the perspectives of others or see any needs beyond the self, we have the potential to leave that form of mind behind to develop a *socialized mind* that internalizes the traditions of the community and allows us to cooperate with others, a *self-authoring mind* that allows us to distance ourselves from that community to take responsibility for our own lives, or even a *self-transforming mind* that intentionally embraces interdependent relationships with each other and the world around us. Many factors go into our ability to transition from lower stages to higher ones, and not everyone can or will make these changes. But the point is that change is possible—and can bring important benefits.

As Berger (2012) and Kegan and Lahey (2009) emphasized, each form of mind is valuable in its own way. What is more, "higher" forms of mind have nothing to do with intelligence, skill, or capacity for ethical action. However, each stage to stage represents a qualitative leap in the complexity of problems we can solve, and if people find themselves "stuck" in a stage that does not match the complexity of the world around them, they can struggle to respond to it. When translated into adulthood, a self-sovereign mind, which Berger estimated around 13 percent of adults have, finds it hard to understand abstractions, work with others, or even handle many basic adult responsibilities. A socialized mind, which she thought 46 percent of adults possess, is intensely loyal and productive in groups and can solve problems within the vocabulary of its community but is at a loss when those traditions and norms are no longer appropriate, come into conflict with each other, or are brought into contact with radically different points of view. A self-authoring mind, which she believed accounts for 41 percent of adults, easily asserts itself in a broader world and responds well to complex leadership challenges but becomes frustrated when its rugged individualism is defeated by forces no single person can control. In those situations, the self-transforming mind, which she estimated less than 1 percent of all adults possess, becomes essential because of its capacity for interdependent problem-solving, but even here, those with a self-transforming mind may experience difficulties interacting with people who cannot see the world as they do. Here, coaching's transformative potential lies in broadening, deepening, and extending each of these forms of mind, allowing them to learn new, more nuanced ways of responding to the world.

The coaching literature is replete with models and approaches to accomplish this task. Kegan and Lahey's (2009) immunity to change theory, for instance, focuses on unearthing the hidden commitments and assumptions that unintentionally subvert the things people truly want to do and gently testing those problematic beliefs to allow more constructive ones to grow. Berger's (2012; Berger & Johnson, 2015; Berger & Fitzgerald, 2019) growth edge coaching model focuses more intently on developmental stages, encouraging habits of mind that enable people to embrace change and complexity constructively. Boyatzis's (2019; McKee, Boyatzis, & Johnson, 2008) intentional change theory works differently but toward the same end, helping people develop compelling visions for themselves, confront the gaps between where they are and where they want to be, and building a learning agenda and relational support systems that move them slowly toward new ways of being and thinking. Lasley et al.'s (2015) vision of coaching for transformation takes a much more phenomenological approach, inviting people to take stock of their needs and values, experience the moment more deeply, envision new possibilities and perspectives, and confront their shadows and shortcomings. Kimsey-House and Kimsey-House's (2011) co-active coaching model champions a dynamic

coaching relationship that helps people change by helping them explore how they process the world, develop a vision for the fulfilling life they want, and rebalance their lives to bring them closer to that vision. Underneath these models, the coaching literature depends on a wealth of research, with a special interest on how positive psychology (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001, 2009; Seligman, 2002), emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1994), and mindfulness (Hall, 2013) lay the groundwork for mindsets primed for constructive growth (Dweck, 2016).

The coaching literature sees this growth as contributing to *transformational leadership* of oneself and others. On an individual level, transformational leadership seeks a complex and nuanced appreciation of one's sense of vocation and philosophy of work (Palmer, 2000; Whyte, 2001), as well as the maturity and integrity necessary for managing in and responding to moments of complexity, crisis, and emotional toxicity in the workplace (Kegan & Lahey, 2009; Berger & Johnson, 2015; Colonna, 2019). Transformational leadership on an individual level is understood to expand beyond the self to "resonate" (McKee, Boyatzis, and Johnson, 2008) throughout entire organizations and communities. Just as positive, mature, constructive leaders can influence others for tremendous good, the disruptive frequencies of negative, immature, destructive leaders can have profoundly disastrous effects on others, organizations, society, and even the world. This realization gives ethical urgency to coaching practice. We must, the coaching literature has contended, develop the human capacity for wisdom, judgement, and problem-solving if humanity is to survive in a moment of worldwide pandemics, economic disruption, climate change, war and civil unrest, economic and social inequality, political dysfunction, interpersonal and intercultural conflict, sexism and racism, and constant technological revolution. And time may be running short.

Consequently, coaching does not mark a return to the moral cul-de-sac (Arnett, 1997) of a therapeutic culture (Rieff, 1966), in which the individualistic narcissism of the minimal self reigns supreme (Lasch, 1979, 1984). In fact, in a moment when everyone has been disembedded from the communities, narratives, and moral sources that have traditionally offered direction and purpose (Taylor, 1992; 2007), the inner work of coaching—what Palmer (2004) has described as "the work before the work" (p. 104)—is essential. As Boyatzis (2019; McKee, Boyatzis, & Johnson, 2008) has proposed, coaching centers around five interrelated questions: *What, who, and how do I want to be? How is that different from who I am right now? What do I have to change and learn to become that person? What steps can I take, right now, to begin that growth? How can I build the relationships I need to support me?* In the words of Palmer (2000), the answers to these questions are *personal*, not *private*, in that each prepares us for ethical action in the world. Understanding one's vocational purpose, building the resources to earn a doctorate as a first-generation college student, transitioning from the tenure track into nonprofit leadership, and leading an academic unit through existential change reach far beyond the destiny of an individual self. What, who, and how we choose to be affects everyone we touch. In this sense, coaching is not a luxury or idle exercise but a vital practice for forming persons and leaders of character and, in turn, the institutions and communities they lead.

The ICF (2019) forms leaders through a coaching model organized along eleven core competencies. The first three of these competencies create a foundation by reinforcing ethical principles and distinguishing coaching from psychotherapy (Competency 1), establishing expectations for the coaching process (Competency 2), and setting norms for the coaching relationship (Competency 3). The intentionality of coaching conversations is important in establishing norms that lift the conversation out of the realm of idle talk (Heidegger, 1996). "Without commitment, the coaching can drift," Lasley et al. (2015) observed (p. 30), and they operationalized this commitment in terms of "contracts" or "agreements" that establish ethical and programmatic boundaries, goals for the coaching relationship, and the coach's personal

commitment to the other's growth (p. 27). Together, these contracts create what Lasley et al. call a "container" (p. 8) that shapes a distinctive conversational praxis. Each session, the conversation begins by clarifying what topic the other wants to explore, the outcome they feel would be most valuable, the meaning of that result to them, and how they will know they have been successful in reaching that goal. The conversation ends by asking the other to reflect on their growth and learning during the session, commit to actions that further their progress, and consider how they will keep their intentions. Although highly structured, these questions are essential in reminding both the coach and the other of the work they must do, and in the hands of a seasoned coach, they flow easily.

The next five core competencies establish expectations for the communication that occurs within the relationship, communication that the ICF (2019), following Kimsey-House and Kimsey House (2011), has described as "dancing in the moment" (Competency 4, sec. 1). These competencies frame a presence characterized by receptivity, flexibility, and assuredness (Competency 4) and defined by active listening that encourages persons to share their thoughts, feelings, hopes, and experiences (Competency 5). What sets coaching apart is the emphasis on questioning that prompts "discovery, insight, commitment or action" (Competency 6, sec. 2), often by challenging people's assumptions about the world. In coaching, questioning is careful and intentional, focusing on open-ended queries that deepen reflection (Competency 6). In this playful give-and-take, the coach walks alongside the other to help them discover new metaphors to describe the world, new perspectives to reframe their experience, and new options that open possibilities for their lives (Competency 7). In the process, the coaching relationship helps people become more aware of their strengths and gifts, their goals and sense of purpose, their core values and ethical commitments, the beliefs and assumptions that limit their growth, and the areas where they need to change in order to make those goals a reality (Competency 8).

The ICF's (2019) remaining three competencies describe how coaching helps people grow through actions and accountability structures that foster "experimentation and self-discovery, where the client applies what has been discussed and learned during sessions immediately afterward in his/her work or life setting" (Competency 9, sec. 4). As this competency suggests, the "homework" emerging from coaching conversations is obviously helpful in moving the other toward their objectives, but not always in the way we might expect. While the other may indeed make real progress between sessions, the homework they agree to pursue is simply an experiment, nothing more. While fulfilling a commitment to write ten pages on one's dissertation is obviously worth celebrating, *not* fulfilling that commitment can be just as, and perhaps even more, important because it can highlight hidden obstacles and suggest new areas for reflection. The process of planning and setting goals (Competency 10) and establishing frameworks for accountability (Competency 11) is thus recursive, with persons zigging and zagging as they find their way. The coach's goal is to remain open to these fits and starts, balancing a commitment to accountability—asking the other about their progress, for instance, and helping the other to relate the "part" of a particular action with the "whole" of the long-term goal—with an equally strong recognition that human development is always messier than anyone wants it to be (Brownell, 2019).

Together, the ICF core competencies frame a compelling approach to transformative leadership development that speaks to the challenges of communication administration today. Yet, despite the constant return of the coaching literature to the discursive dynamics of the coaching relationship, the influence of communication studies on coaching seems virtually nonexistent. Brock's (2019) extensive list of influences on coaching theory and practice included everything from neuroscience, adult education theory, and leadership studies to

sociolinguistics, 12-step programs, and New Age spirituality but absolutely no reference to any communication scholarship whatsoever. But even as coaching scholarship may tend to gloss over the rhetorical and communicative dimensions of coaching practice (Swanson, 2002), communication scholarship has left coaching almost entirely unexplored. A March 2020 keyword search of Google Scholar, for instance, yielded over 1.4 million articles and books on coaching practice, while a similar search of EBSCOHost's Communication and Mass Media Complete yielded only 175 scholarly articles, with only a little more than a dozen focusing on coaching in the sense that is being discussed here. What is more, this research has typically examined the practice within instructional settings (Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009; Stowers & Barker, 2010; Haneda, Teeman, and Sherman, 2016; Warner & Hewett, 2017; Helens-Hart, 2018) and professional life (Swanson, 2002; Onyemah, 2009; Rettinger, 2011) without grappling with the provocative and challenging questions that the coaching literature raises. And communication scholarship is sorely missed in this discussion. After all, if the core of coaching is an interpersonal relationship grounded in dialogue—a word constantly invoked throughout the coaching field but rarely defined or philosophically explored—we need to understand what that dialogue is, what it means, and how to foster it. Instead, what we have in coaching is a proliferation of "models" that, while profoundly helpful, can reduce coaching to a technique-driven conversational aesthetic that serves no one.

Even more important, communication studies is vital in understanding what a generative coaching relationship truly is. If the core of coaching is, as Boyatzis (2019; McKee, Boyatzis, & Johnson, 2008) and Kegan and Lahey (2009) have argued, ultimately grounded in how we respond to the world and relate to ourselves and others, communication scholarship can help understand those relationships, what they mean for human life, and how to help people pursue strong ones. If the purpose of the coaching relationship is to find ways to invite what is invisible to us—our most powerful emotions, deepest beliefs and motivations, sense of calling, and so on—to "show up" or incarnate itself in the world (Kimsey-House & Kimsey-House, 2011), the study of communication, which itself begins in the recognition of the invisible power of words to create meanings that are embodied in our private and public lives, is essential. In this sense, then, we must insist that coaching is intrinsically communicative and that to neglect this phenomenon weakens both coaching and communication scholarship. The notion of *communicative coaching* thus intentionally foregrounds what is always already the case.

Making the move to communicative coaching necessitates an additional move toward communication ethics. Kimsey-House and Kimsey-House (2011) have framed coaching as the pursuit of human flourishing between co-creative or co-active equals. The work of Arnett, Fritz, and Bell (2009), however, suggests that for this mutual flourishing to occur, communicative coaching must acknowledge, protect, and promote goods that situate the ICF core competencies in a broader ethical and philosophical framework. Doing so enables communicative coaching to understand both the coaching relationship and the human flourishing that this relationship fosters: a relationship defined by what Aristotle (1999) called virtuous friendship that asks both parties to pursue, in the words of Whyte (2001), "good work, done well for the right reasons and with an end in mind" (p. 12). Embracing this work within communication administration benefits individuals, higher education institutions, and society as a whole.

The Goods of Communicative Coaching

In her work on virtue ethics in professional settings, Fritz (2013) argued that we know and understand a profession by the goods that it protects and promotes. As Arnett et al. (2009)

have observed, recognizing what matters to people and institutions and learning how to welcome and foster those goods is vital to negotiating the complexity of contemporary society, where these goods are unclear or are placed in contention with each other. Where goods are absent or forgotten, ungrounded practices can float off into the sky, producing confusion instead of hope. What is more, if coaches are insensitive to the ways in which people from different backgrounds understand and prioritize the goods that guide them—if they are, in the terminology of Arnett et al., ethically illiterate—their work will most certainly cause unintentional harm. As a result, if communicative coaching is to foster human flourishing, those who engage in it must attend to the communicative goods that sustain their work, and these goods also need to be flexible enough to accommodate a society of increasing ethical complexity and difference. In this section, I briefly propose six goods that seem particularly important for coaching practice, recognizing that each is complex and has its own intellectual lineage that requires exploration in its own right. At best, then, this list is merely a proposal, an outline that invites further inquiry.

From the start, communicative coaching emerges in the context of something a person cannot handle on their own: a difficult job or life transition, professional difficulties and setbacks, or leadership uncertainties. As Arendt (2005) observed, the existence of these moments should not surprise us. The human condition necessarily unfolds within *boundary situations*: Our time on earth is short, our resources are limited, there are always others who contend with us, and each stage of our lives makes new demands for which we are never fully prepared. Following Jaspers (1970), Arendt argued that we can engage boundary situations only through conversation with one another. This realization is core to coaching, which is built on the presupposition that lasting growth occurs only through relationship (Lasley et. al, 2015; Kimsey-House & Kimsey-House, 2011; Boyatzis, 2019; McKee, Boyatzis, & Johnson, 2008). At first blush, we might tend to see these boundary situations as the problems that coaching is designed to help persons learn to avoid, transcend, or even plow over. Yet, Arendt's work suggests that boundary situations could be the most important good that coaching must embrace. After all, these moments are not only what calls coaching into being but also call persons to embrace their contingent humanity, with all of the sufferings and potentials it contains. As a result, instead of promising to unleash unlimited potential, communicative coaching moves in the opposite direction, toward the limits that so vex us. Communicative coaches cannot eliminate boundary situations from human existence, *nor should they ever want to*. Instead, they help the other grow into and around their difficulties and, even more important, lean into the tensions they find there.

Entering into boundary situations with the other requires communicative coaches to pursue the good of *mindful listening*, a good that runs through the heart of the coaching literature. Kimsey-House and Kimsey-House (2011) have argued that listening occurs in coaching on three levels simultaneously: *internal listening*, in which coaches become aware of their own responses to what they are hearing; *focused listening*, which opens coaches' awareness to what the other person says; and *global listening*, which challenges coaches to listen to what *is not* being said—the others' emotions, beliefs and assumptions, energy, and physical presence. Lipari's (2014) notion of *interlistening* dovetails elegantly with these observations. For Lipari, listening is omnipresent and always-already, constantly inviting us to become aware of ourselves and the other. What can we learn from their words, their tone of voice, their bodily positions and sensations, their pace of talking, the emotions that they allow to hang in the air? And what can we make of their silences, the things may they point to but lie unarticulated out of fear, uncertainty, or pain? Calling us to *listen otherwise*, Lipari's work challenges communicative coaches to a stance of vulnerability that *listens the other*

to speech and, in turn, creates the space where coaching can occur. Even more important, by listening closely to the other, communicative coaches can teach the other to listen to themselves, perhaps for the first time.

Within the space listening creates, the communicative coach probes gently to facilitate the other's learning and growth. Doing so requires them to cultivate the good of *questioning*. As Brownell (2019) observed, coaching is a hermeneutic encounter, the quality of which depends on the questions we ask, not the answers that we give (Gadamer, 2004). As a result, the coaching literature focuses intently on discovering ways to ask powerful, transformative questions (Kimsey-House & Kimsey-House, 2011; Lasley et al., 2015), with entire books written on the subject (Stoltzfus, 2008). Good questions, Stolzfus (2008) wrote, encourage the other to explore, spark new ways of seeing, and open new possibilities for action. Strong questions, he continued, aim to be concise, direct, nonjudgmental, and open-ended, and wherever possible, they should mirror the other's own words to draw attention to the webs of metaphorical significance and petite narratives (Arnett & Arneson, 1999) that define the other's life. From the coach's perspective, a good question is an act of humility that moves the coach from being an expert to being a co-inquirer and from being a talker to being a listener. From the other's perspective, a good question is a revelatory act that allows them to become aware of what truly fulfills them, how they can achieve a better balance in their lives, and how they process their experience (Kimsey-House & Kimsey-House, 2011). Where the good of listening welcomes the other, the good of questioning is the means by which the other is received and affirmed.

The good of questioning opens three other goods, each of which poses an essential question that defines the coaching relationship. The first is the good of *acknowledgement*. Both Kimsey-House and Kimsey-House (2011) and Lasley et al. (2015) have emphasized the importance of acknowledging the other's progress, strengths, and gifts within the coaching process. Yet, Hyde (2006) has urged us to see that acknowledgment is of fundamental importance, especially in boundary situations where the other is in the midst of a crisis of unknowing. "Acknowledgement is a moral act," he wrote:

> It functions to transform space and time, to *create* openings wherein people can dwell, deliberate, and know together what is right, good, just, and truthful. Acknowledgement thereby grants people *hope*, the opportunity for a new beginning, a second chance, whereby they might improve their lot in life. (p. 7)

In contrast to the negative acknowledgement that greets the other in dismissive and often destructive ways, Hyde positioned positive acknowledgment as a recognition not only of the other's strengths and potentials but also of the gift of the other's very humanity. It starts, he argued, with a simple, open-ended question that calls us to the ground of coaching practice: *Where are you?* Asked in the agony of transition, these words sound in the darkness, seeking a response—*Here I am!*—that allows the other to affirm their presence and dignity. Through this gentle yet profound drama of being sought and seen, Hyde suggested, communicative coaches recognize the other's essential need for support and confirmation as they make their way through the wilderness of life. Practicing the good of acknowledgement invites them to recognize that the essence of helping ultimately lies not in the models that they deploy but in the humble actions of receiving, affirming, and accompanying the other (Schein, 2009).

Acknowledging others as they stand at the crossroads of their lives requires steadfast dedication to another good, what Arnett (2015) has called *tenacious hope*, the ability of the other

to keep going in the face of difficulty. Within coaching, positive emotions like hope, interest, love, and joy are particularly cherished because of their ability to broaden perspectives and build the resources necessary to make constructive and lasting changes (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001, 2009; Seligman, 2002; Kimsey-House & Kimsey-House, 2011; Boyatzis, 2019; McKee, et al., 2008). But while understanding what we really want and hope to bring about in our lives is vital, communicative coaches cannot ignore that boundary situations are painful places to be—and that we are *thrown* there, often suddenly and traumatically (Heidegger, 1996): Brilliant students struggle to find work, good faculty members are denied tenure, unexpected events send enrollments crashing, and vibrant universities teeter on bankruptcy. In these moments, tenacious hope draws on our ideal vision for ourselves for the strength to look reality square in the eye (McKee, et al., 2008). From that stance, we have the confidence to ask the question Colonna (2014) adapted from a Zen proverb: *This being so, so what?* Yes, things are bad, but what is good? And most important of all, how can we respond to the bad to allow the good to flourish? Colonna's question captures a lesson Palmer (2000) learned from an Outward Bound instructor: "If you can't get out of it, get into it" (p. 84). Through helping the other "get into it," communicative coaching embraces both the reality of the rocks of our lives and our undeniable capacity to make the impossible possible.

Once the other finds their feet on the rocks of life, communicative coaches work with them to find their way. Seeking this path requires a sixth good of *practice-making*. The notion of *practice* comes from MacIntyre (1984) as a way of embodying virtue and excellence in everyday life. MacIntyre, with Aristotle (1999), was adamant that while we can never truly achieve excellence, we can practice it, in the same way that the daily disciplines of playing chess, writing, or leading institutions can, over time, develop our capacity for mastery. The need to create these daily disciplines prompts a third question adapted from Thurman (1974): *How can you dwell on your growing edge?* For Thurman, the growing edge is the delicate, multifaceted line between where we are and where we need to be, and if we are to mature as persons, we must not just find that edge but set up camp there. Practices are a way of pitching our tent and staking a claim. They press on that line gently to expand and redirect it, with the understanding that small, incremental moves over time lead to deep transformation. For this reason, communicative coaching focuses most often on *micropractices* (Fritz, 2013) that are easily woven into the texture of our lives: expressing gratitude more often, taking care not to speak over others, participating more frequently in class, meditating daily, connecting with others, writing a page per day on a dissertation, or many others. Practices are different from goals, in that they are open-ended, invitational, and experimental—small, but significant enough to the other to encourage them forward. But most important, practices are gentle, offered with the recognition that failing can be just as helpful to our learning as succeeding. The point of a practice is simply to practice and, through that effort, grow to become the people we need to be.

Together, these six goods—boundary situations, mindful listening, questioning, acknowledgment, tenacious hope, and practice-making—establish a framework for thinking about communicative coaching itself as a practice that a coach never masters but always strives to perfect. Communicative coaching, as an act of service, fosters the growth of the coach, as well, transforming *them* just as they are walking alongside others in moments of transition. Meeting people at the boundaries of their lives, communicative coaching serves as an interpersonal ethical praxis in a time of change, embracing the vocation of listening to open a space for playful questioning that acknowledges the humanity of the other, fosters tenacious hope, and seeks practices that encourage growth to meet a complex world. This development manifests itself slowly over time, as the other engages in micropractices build into real,

constructive changes in their lives, their organizations, and their communities. Communicative coaching, in this sense, facilitates inner work with public significance that speaks to the unprecedented uncertainties currently facing communication administration. The next section suggests how it might engage this context, which Arnett (1992) calls the *academic home*.

Communicative Coaching in the Academic Home

Arnett (1992) has described higher education teaching and administration as a praxis of creating and sustaining academic homes where students, faculty, and administrators can dwell and grow together. By framing higher education as a home, Arnett did not mean that academia is a private space. He saw academic institutions as public spaces with tremendous importance for the world around them. But like Arendt (1968), Arnett believed that academic spaces should be set apart from an increasingly intrusive marketplace demanding ever-higher levels of consumption, an overwhelmingly present media culture serving up ever-more tempting levels of distraction, and a traumatically knotted political culture demanding that students solve an ever-expanding list of problems before they are ready. As these academic homes are experiencing unprecedented levels of stress and pressure, communicative coaching, as a practice of humane learning and service to others, becomes vital for the faculty and administrators charged with sustaining these homes and, most important of all, supporting the students whose lives they shape.

In her work on civility in the workplace, Fritz (2013) contended that professional spaces like academic homes revolve around the cultivation of four goods: the good of *productivity*, which reminds members of the work that they do together; the good of *place*, which invites them to attend to the narrative ground that shapes their organizational lives; the good of *persons*, which calls them to enrich the public lives of others; and the good of the *profession*, which challenges them to respect the vocations to which they have been called. For Fritz, differences among professional vocations and institutional missions give rise to a diversity of organizational forms. This means that different academic homes, even within the same discipline, will prioritize different goods in different ways. A communication department at a large public university will not live and work in the same way as a department at a small, religiously affiliated liberal arts college. As a result, incorporating coaching into these homes—either on an informal basis or through creating a "coaching culture" that makes coaching a central part of academic administration—needs to respect these differences.

Coaches may be internal or external to the organizations they serve. External coaches, who are typically hired to work with senior executives or rising stars, always enter as guests and thus face the challenge of understanding the narrative ground of the organizational home. Internal coaches, on the other hand, emerge from the organization itself and work with a much broader array of people as a part of their other responsibilities. While these coaches often have a better understanding of the local home, they must also navigate more complex relationships because they are typically serving in multiple roles simultaneously. As I incorporate coaching within the context of my role as a professor at a Catholic comprehensive university, my role is most similar to an internal coach, in which coaching is simply a natural outgrowth of my service responsibilities to advise and guide undergraduate and graduate students. To live out this role more fully, I completed an ICF-accredited training program at a local university and am pursuing certification in coaching, but incorporating coaching does not require such extensive preparation. Rather, it simply requires a willingness to meet students and others in moments of uncertainty, challenge, and transition and walk alongside them for a while with questions instead of answers.

In my syllabi and at the beginning of each semester, I let students know that I am happy to coach them in their vocational development to help them transition to the workplace or graduate school. The announcement lasts only about a minute and is offered without any sort of pressure, but I have found that even this brief message attracts a number of students. Currently, I meet with between five and six students per week for an hour per session. Some students meet with me only once or twice, while others talk with me biweekly over several months. At the start of each relationship, I take care to distinguish coaching from the services provided at the university counseling center and remind students that while our talks will remain confidential, this confidentiality ends in situations where they say something that would indicate that they would be a danger to themselves or others. We discuss the coaching process, as well, to establish clear expectations from the outset. They understand that I am not there to solve the challenges they are facing but to help them reflect on where they are, discover new possibilities and perspectives on their challenges, and encourage them to move forward.

Our conversations focus on helping students think through their vocational transitions, with the understanding that this task is much more complex than simply finding a job. They are free to set the agenda, and we explore a variety of things: refining their sense of vocational direction and purpose, managing stress around graduating, improving their organizational and time management skills, building professional networks, thinking through the process of applying to graduate school, or improving their self-confidence as they take their first, tentative steps from the classroom to the "real world." Where students ask for answers in an area that speaks to my expertise, such as in applying to graduate school, I certainly give it, but I am clear to distinguish this advice-giving from the coaching we are doing. In addition, although many of these students are not Catholic or even practicing Christians, the spiritual questions that are always in the background of coaching practice (Hall, 2019) often come to the fore. In this way, coaching facilitates the good of productivity that is sensitive to the unique priorities of the place where our conversation takes place: a Catholic university whose holistic approach emphasizes the development not only of their job skills and intellects but also of their character, religious identity, and sense of calling (Newman, 1999).

Fostering the good of persons in an academic home is a more delicate balance. Arnett (1992) warned that academic homes need to be wary of promising too much to students beyond a commitment to mutual respect within the instructional relationship. Academic departments cannot promise that "we care," he argued, because "such a promise cannot always be delivered and in some cases should not even be attempted" (p. 23). For Arnett, content, not intimacy, must always remain the center of teaching and learning. Arnett's concerns remain important. Yet, students today face tremendous pressures that were unheard of when Arnett wrote over 25 years ago that manifest themselves in apathy, bitterness, cynicism, and even despair and can have caustic effects on academic life (Karolak & Maier, 2015). Even more important, such sentiments are increasingly common among faculty and administrators as they, too, struggle with complexity. Palmer (2000) has described these sentiments as *shadow-casting monsters* that have profoundly toxic effects on our lives together: *self-doubt* about our worth and abilities, *hostility* toward the world, *functional atheism* that assumes that everything is up to us alone, *fear* of failure, and *self-denial* about our limitations. For public life to thrive, he argued, we need to engage in inner work to tame these monsters before they harm ourselves and others.

Coaching is one approach to monster-taming. As Colonna (2019) observed, coaching at its best is a compassionate call to grow up and take responsibility for oneself and our lives together. Instead of allowing the other to wallow in their frustrations, coaching asks questions

that encourage them to learn new ways of seeing, develop their strengths and wisdom, and call them to respond to life in new ways: "What would your job search look like if you accepted your gifts instead of suppressing them just to fit in with others?" "What is one thing you can do, right now, to make that move to New York City?" "How would your life feel if you assumed that most people are willing to help you, instead of thinking you are all alone?" These questions, when combined with opportunities for reflection and small, intentional practices, expand the other's imagination and deepen their capacity to live purposeful lives. To put it differently, we can see coaching as a short-term (or even a somewhat longer-term) directed readings course exploring the other's personal and professional development, in which the learning outcome is the transformation of themselves and the world.

At an administrative level, seeing coaching as a sort of independent study complementing traditional coursework has important implications for liberal arts programs. Kegan and Lahey (2009) observed that traditional educational programs are designed to help students acquire and strengthen discrete skills, whether those skills are writing, speaking, interpreting data, running experiments, or planning marketing campaigns. While high-quality content remains essential, they argued, it does little to address the complexity and individualized nature of developmental learning, which cannot be delivered en masse to formal classrooms. This argument is important because it suggests not only that the most innovative teachers and pedagogical methods can, at best, meet only part of students' needs—a reality we see daily, as students express doubts about the applicability of their coursework to their lives—but also that, as older adolescents and young adults, students often struggle because their level of adult development is no match for the challenges they currently face. Arriving at campus with the self-sovereign or socialized minds of their youth, they are, as Berger (2012) described, in over their heads in ways that no "life skills" curriculum can address, because the learning they need to do runs much deeper than balancing a checkbook, planning a business, or whatever other "practical" skills we can fit on a syllabus. Indeed, this learning can *never* be put on a syllabus. Nevertheless, it is essential for students to grow into the complexity of a world that is often just as uncertain and worrisome as they think.

Coaching can foster this learning in two important ways. First, students can be either encouraged or required to receive coaching as part of existing undergraduate and graduate courses to help them develop the forms of mind necessary to navigate the world. Van Nieuwerburgh, Knight, and Campbell's (2019) GROWTH (Goals, Reality, Options, Will, Tactics, and Habits) model and Wendell and Sabatine's (2019) ADAPT (Authentic Purpose Targeted) model, for instance, are both designed for this very purpose. In my own teaching, I am beginning to incorporate coaching formally into two courses, a 200-level course for sophomores and juniors and a 500-level course for entering master's degree students that both focus on the intersection of communication and the marketplace. Along with inviting students to engage in individual coaching, as I mentioned above, I now supplement the formal academic content with several "labs" that function like group coaching experiences where students can engage in vocational discernment and begin to think seriously about negotiating the transition between the classroom and the marketplace. My work in these classes is still taking shape, but students have received these labs well. In the Fall 2019 semester, I received my highest teaching evaluations ever for my 200-level course. In their written comments, students praised the activities and were grateful for the opportunity to explore their professional development in ways that they had been unable to do in their other classes or even at the university's career center. In the future, I plan to find ways to foster students' development more intentionally and deeply in keeping with Kegan and Lahey's (2009) and Berger's (2012) insights.

Second, coaching can help create new types of educational initiatives, especially graduate and certificate programs for working professionals. Kegan and Lahey (2009) contended that the diversity of challenges these leaders face, the roles they are striving to pursue, and the demands for continuous growth they experience make coaching even more essential for them, perhaps in ways that replace traditional coursework. This insight points to a new type of hybrid model that would exist alongside current efforts that straddle face-to-face and online formats. As Kegan and Lahey's theory suggests, this new hybridity would focus not on helping students assimilate a set of discrete skills necessary to master a particular problem they are facing but rather on helping them grow to respond to a pressing problem that is currently *mastering them*. Toward that end, these programs would conceivably feature intensive, face-to-face experiences at key touchpoints to help students understand and frame the problem they want to address, traditional online or face-to-face courses to address skill deficits and strengthen their theoretical and ethical foundations, and ongoing coaching to encourage the developmental transitions they need to make, all of which leads to a capstone project that is both personally meaningful and professionally relevant. Although it has yet to be fully tested, this *three-dimensional hybridity*—face-to-face and online, lecture-based and coaching-intensive, skill-based learning and developmental learning—could be key in the years to come.

Beyond these curricular implications, coaching can be useful in other areas of communication administration. As an approach to faculty development, coaching can be a powerful addition to emerging faculty programs, campus teaching centers, community-engaged learning programs, and promotion and tenure processes to help graduate students and new and established faculty contend with pedagogical challenges and scholarly roadblocks. What is more, coaching is an essential component for academic leaders in transition as they move from faculty roles to become chairs, deans, provosts, and presidents. When done with care, coaching can fill crucial but often neglected gaps in faculty and administrators' professional formation, enabling all of the members of the academic home to become the full, flourishing, and response-able people that they were born to be. In this, coaching can help them answer what Fritz (2013) saw as the fourth good of professional civility, the good of the profession itself. For Fritz, this good centers on three questions: *What is it that I do? What good do I pursue? Whom or what do I serve?* Each member of the academic home will answer these questions differently, and the answers they give will define the educational paths students pursue, the way faculty conduct their teaching, scholarship, and service, and the decisions administrators make to sustain the institution as a whole. By affirming the good of the academic profession, coaching in communication administration is an act of service that invites everyone to remember their purpose, renew themselves, and strengthen their local home from within.

Conclusion: Deepening Coaching in Communication Administration

This essay has explored coaching within the context of higher education with a special emphasis on how communication scholars, teachers, and administrators might approach the field. Building on the body of knowledge developed by the International Coaching Federation and the coaching literature, it has sought to enrich and deepen coaching by acknowledging and affirming the practice's intrinsic communicativity. That exploration, in turn, framed communicative coaching as defined by six goods that sustain the coaching relationship. Grounded in mindful listening and questioning, coaching walks alongside the other in the boundary situations of their lives in ways that acknowledge their intrinsic humanity, deepen

their capacity for tenacious hope, and invite practices that can help them become the people they are meant to be. Pushing off of the scholarship of Arnett (1992) and Fritz (2013), the essay then described how coaching might translate into the academic home of communication administration in ways that affirm the productivity of students, faculty, and administrators, the institutional place in which the coaching takes place, the struggles of persons to grow in maturity and character, and the challenges of sustaining a meaningful professional identity in changing times.

This framework opens many opportunities for further inquiry. How might communication studies continue to enrich the coaching literature? How can we deepen our understanding of the goods that define communicative coaching, as well as its role in promoting professional civility in the academic home? How might communicative coaching help students, faculty, and administrators who are racial and sexual minorities, who are first-generation college students, or who come from other marginalized backgrounds? How can communicative coaching be integrated—formally or informally—into instruction and administrative leadership? What would three-dimensional hybridity look like in practice? How might we teach and encourage students, faculty, and administrators to coach each other? In pursuing these questions, communicative coaching, when walked into communication administration, becomes a collective endeavor of acknowledgement, accompaniment, and humanity. Building our capacity to serve each other, it enables the academic home to be a welcoming, collaborative and generative place brimming with new stories, new responses to the world emerging around us, and new hope that the impossible may yet be possible.

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