

Unlocking Foreclosed Beliefs: An Autoethnographic Story about a Family Business Leadership Dilemma

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Yarborough, J. P., & Lowe, K. B. (2007). Unlocking Foreclosed Beliefs: An Autoethnographic Story about a Family Business Leadership Dilemma. *Culture and Organization*. 13(3), 239-249.

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Abstract:

Autoethnographers research how self interacts with culture. In what ways do a person and culture intersect and at what consequence? Autoethnographers explore these questions using their own experience to reflect on self-other interactions and the greater cultural meaning. In this autoethnographic story, the first author reflects on dilemmas he experienced when considering whether or not to succeed his father as president of his family's business. He reports his journey through this process in the context of a professional helping relationship. An 'executive counselor' was engaged to explore issues of career foreclosure, motivation, and leadership dilemmas as they came into conflict with self-expectations and 'overriding goals'. This story provides insight into some dimensions of an executive counseling relationship, explores themes relevant to family business succession, and addresses some consequences of career foreclosure and ways an executive counselor might help a client break out of the foreclosed state.

Key words: Ethnography; Leadership; Succession; Family business; Work motivation; Coaching; Adler

Article:

The goal of an individual's life ... marks the line of direction for all acts and movements. This goal enables us to understand the hidden meaning behind the various separate acts and to see them as parts of the whole. (Alfred Adler, Ansbacher and Ansbacher, 1956: 92)

Autoethnographers research how 'self interacts with 'culture' (Holt, 2003). In what ways do a person and culture intersect and at what consequence (Reed-Danahay, 1997)? Autoethnographers explore these questions using their own experience to reflect on self-other interactions and the greater cultural meaning. In this autoethnographic account, we consider the following questions: How might an executive counselor help distinguish whether or not a person's life goal is congruent with the pressures of family business leadership? And what are the implications of incongruence?

The first author reflects on dilemmas he experienced when considering whether or not to succeed his father as president of the family business. An executive counselor was engaged to help him process his options. The client and counselor explore issues of career foreclosure, motivation, and leadership dilemmas as they came into conflict with self-expectations and the author's 'overriding goal'. As the author discovered what truly motivated him, he realized that many of his long-held assumptions about leadership and his role in the family business were incongruent. This story portrays the process through which this insight emerged. When my father, Yogi Yarborough, was 30 he started a furniture hardware supply business in the southeastern United States. He specialized in sourcing screws and fasteners overseas, then importing them for American furniture manufacturers. Through the early 1970s and 80s, this business model was fresh—and extremely profitable.

By the time I entered the picture, three decades later, Dad's business was not so fresh or profitable. The furniture supply industry was undergoing dramatic changes. Imported furniture drove revenues down and sent domestic manufacturing overseas. Hardware suppliers threw competitive elbows to preserve their piece of a shrinking economic pie. Ever the optimist, Dad assumed we could persevere and eventually the market would come back. My analysis was more sober. Dramatic change was needed—either we restructured and developed new product niches or the end would be upon us sooner or later.

Every month I scanned the profit and loss statement with three feelings: a sinking heart—I didn't want to let Yarborough & Company down; a churning stomach—if we couldn't turn things around I wasn't sure what the future might bring; and burning ears—I felt like everyone was watching. It was incumbent on me to develop the winning strategy, to lead, or so I thought. But I had more questions than answers. The stress was not doing my attitude any favors.

I hated my customers for pounding us. They began with partnership rhetoric: 'we want 'collaboration' with our suppliers...', but they usually finished the conversation demanding the lowest prices, the highest levels of service and quality—or else. This wouldn't have been so bad if demands were reasonable, but desperate competitors would commit to one-sided programs at their own peril. As a small, privately owned business, we were unsure how long we could continue standing firm against 'bad' business deals.

These professional challenges were daunting, and throughout I felt a gnawing sense of displacement. Dad often spoke of the business becoming 'mine' in a few years, but it was obvious to me that without radical changes,

there would be little left to hand over. My self-questioning mind was never at peace. I secretly wondered if I was the right man for the job, but publicly I put on a brave face.

SEEKING SELF KNOWLEDGE

A respected friend of mine suggested I speak with a professional about these problems. In response to this suggestion, I arranged to meet with Craig Sweeney, an executive coach and leadership specialist. Actually, he's an executive counselor of sorts. He doesn't just 'coach' clients through difficult times. When I called to arrange an appointment, Sweeney provided a brief summary of his approach: 'I encourage you to see more deeply into yourself—to recognize underlying motivations that guide your behavior yet operate beneath your awareness' (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Considering myself a fairly self-aware individual, I had difficulty accepting the notion that I had motivations 'beneath my awareness.' I scheduled an appointment anyway.

I read a car magazine as while sitting in Sweeney's waiting room. Craig entered, and though soft-spoken, his presence filled the place. I recall my first impression: close-cropped hair set above an angularly featured face, bright smile, and blue eyes that were at once penetrating yet kind. Sweeney was slender and of average height. He wore khakis and an oxford-cloth button-down, appearing professional but not to trying too hard. He was completely at ease with himself—authentic.

I hadn't even said so much as 'hello,' yet Craig seemed to see right through me. It was uncomfortable at first, but meeting him allayed some trepidation. The unknown always bothers me. Once I feel like I have a sense of the players and the setting, I'm better able to relax.

Sweeney seemed credible—he looked the part of an executive consultant and I sensed he knew what it was like in the trenches. In retrospect it seems funny that snap judgments are formed on such minutiae—but I was right. Sweeney gestured I should follow him and soon we were seated behind closed doors. His office was brightly lit, with floor-to-ceiling picture windows. We were several stories up, and the windows offered a spectacular view of the surrounding oaks. It seemed you could step right from the window into those century-old canopies—so close, green, and lush were they—a fertile landscape for exploring new opportunity.

After providing information about his professional background, the nature of our confidential relationship and such, Craig explained his executive counseling method:

'So let's think about how we can best work with one another, Preston. There are contingency leadership theories that give insight into what types of leaders best fit certain situations (Fiedler, 1967; Fiedler and Chemers, 1984; Fiedler and Garcia, 1987), situational theories that explain how leaders should behave and communicate in order to get results (Blanchard, Zigarmi, and Zigarmi, 1985) and dyadic exchange theories that suggest ways to generate more effective working relationships (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). These are but a few, and each of these has something valuable to offer. I want you know these kinds of resources are out there since that kind of "leadership expertise" might be what you are expecting. But when I start working with someone, I think it is wise for us to first focus on you.'

A momentary thought flashed, 'Is he checking to see if I have some kind of mental problem?'

'You look a little perplexed—want to share your thoughts?' Whoa. Sweeney didn't miss much!

'Well, I guess I was thinking that we could focus on the management problems—you know, if we could develop an effective strategy that would get me excited about leading dad's company, then I'd probably feel better.' I was hesitant to ask him if he thought I was unfit for my job and this was his way of setting me up for that conversation.

'I hear you ... you sound like a pretty task-focused kind of guy. "Focusing on you" doesn't mean we won't deal with the business challenges, just that we want to establish a foundation, a common language between us. This language enables me to see where you are coming from and helps you interpret and apply our discussions more meaningfully' (Savickas, 1995).

That seemed to make sense and my harsh inner critic's voice faded a bit.

'Typically, I find that everyone has a goal in life. By goal, I don't mean merely making As in class, exceeding quarterly expectations by 20%, or those kinds of things. Each of us has an overriding goal that once identified, enables us to understand hidden meanings behind thoughts, feelings, and actions that otherwise seem unrelated' (Adler, 1931).

'Overriding goal?' I interrupted. 'Hidden meanings?' My voice betrayed some insecurity and doubt. I was no longer sure this conversation was going to go anywhere.

'An overriding goal enables us to see ourselves wholly, rather than in part (Ansbacher and Ansbacher, 1956). And this overriding goal is invisible to you—it's embedded within the fabric of who you are. A fish can't tell

you what it feels like to be wet—it knows nothing else. Similarly, you can't identify your overriding goal because it is such a part of you' (ibid.).

'I see.'

'My role is to help you discern this goal—to make it an intentional part of you and your decision-making. Once identified, you'll be able to assess yourself and your environment more thoroughly. This environment includes your professional life and, to some extent, your personal life as well. I admit, sometimes clients feel this approach hits a little too close to home.'

Initially, I wanted to resist Sweeney's methods—especially the personal aspect. But an inner voice reminded me that I was dealing with a family business dilemma, 'You don't have the luxury of viewing this dilemma as simply a professional making a career decision. This is personal and professional; a big ball of emotional twine that weaves my family, friends and heritage into a nearly indistinguishable whole' (Gersick et al., 1997). I took a leap of faith, perhaps more a leap of desperation, that Sweeney could reduce the churn consuming the remnants of my peace of mind.

EARLY RECOLLECTIONS AND LUKE SKYWALKER

After I briefly summarized our company's current challenges, our industry, and my personal background, Sweeney took our conversation in an odd direction.

'Preston, I'd like you to think back to your earliest memories.'

'Hey, man, I didn't think we were going to do the Freud-on-the-couch thing!' I loudly joked.

'Let's trust the process, shall we? Early recollections serve an important purpose for us (Kern, Belangee and Eckstein, 2004). I'll explain more momentarily. If it makes you feel any better, this isn't a Freudian exercise.'

'I'll be a sport—so you want the earliest memory I can recall? Any memory?'

'Correct. And I want you to tell it to me in great detail, as if you are in the moment. I want to know what you see, you feel, who is present. Think of it like a newspaper story (Kern et al., 2004). I want to hear your story, then I'll try to post a headline that summarizes it, OK?' Sweeney nodded and waited for me to begin.

'I was dining with my Dad, Mom, and younger brother, Scott.'

'Just a reminder, tell me as if you are there. Use the present tense.'

'My bad. Sorry. Here goes: *I am dining with my Dad, Mom, and younger brother. The room is dark and smells of steak and burning wax. We have steaks when Dad feels victorious—dinner-by-candle light is Mom's way of celebrating. The candles cause our five-armed chandelier to cast weird, spider-like shadows on the ceiling. They usually scare Scott and he'll cry until Mom clicks on the overheads. I feel brave because I like the darkness—I like being the oldest. I'm not afraid.*

Dad was excited because they had broken a new sales record that month. I remember telling Dad that he always said that. Then he tells me I have no idea how important it is that he could say that—but I will someday. "One day, you could be running Yarborough & Company... then you'll know".'

I felt excited but also puzzled and curious.

'And how old are you?'

'I suppose I'm about five.'

'Alright, I'll shoot some headlines at you. When it seems like a headline fits, you let me know.'

'Dad victorious at work—family celebrates!'

I nodded.

'I'll throw out another for good measure. "Dad's victory garners brave son's attention!"'

'Yes, both of those seem to work.'

'So we might acknowledge several themes that permeate your early recollection. "I feel important when I'm brave".'

‘Hmmm. Have to think about that one. Well, I guess I can’t argue with it.’

‘Winning gets the kind of attention I want.’

Reflexively I smiled, ‘Absolutely! And I’ll add one more, now that I’m getting the feel of this, “I want to know what Dad knows, because I want to win, too”.’

‘Nice work. Let’s hold onto those themes, “I feel important when I’m brave; winning gets the kind of attention I want; and I want to know what Dad knows, because I want to win too.” We’ll call those Themes of Preoccupation’ (Savickas, 1995).

I found the incisiveness of this exercise startling. My half-suppressed smile betrayed a hint of surprise. He’d tapped into something I hadn’t considered—were I to pause and think about what had been uncovered, I’d have probably had a stronger reaction. At the time, though, I was wrapped within the flow of the interview.

‘Why do you call those Themes of Preoccupation?’

‘You’ve just identified some elements of your life that are central life concerns’ (Savickas, 1995).

I’m a born skeptic, so I performed the innate calculus that comes easily to me. As much as I wanted to argue, I had to admit Sweeney’s statement was accurate. While I wouldn’t say my entire life was preoccupied with winning, feeling important, and knowing what Dad knows—those themes certainly occupied their fair share of my attention. I exhaled deeply. How did we jump from a long-forgotten childhood memory to a “central life concern”? That leap was beyond my comprehension, but it felt on-target. Just as my head was beginning to swim, Sweeney redirected us.

‘Now let’s move in a little bit different direction. Tell me about a role model or hero that influenced you.’

‘Does it have to be someone I knew or can it be a fictional character?’

‘You make that decision, either is fine. If it helps, perhaps you’d like to share a favorite story or movie?’

‘I always gravitated toward Luke Skywalker in Star Wars. I was the perfect age when those movies were released—I was seven when the first one came out. I remember looking skyward and imagining Luke was out there somewhere—maybe even waiting on me to join him. It sounds really goofy, I know.’

‘What was it about Luke that drew you toward him?’

‘Like me, he was young and seemed a little misunderstood. His uncle and aunt wanted him to work on the farm, but he had different dreams. He sensed there was a greater purpose out there. He had special talents that made him important. I felt like I had special abilities that could make me important, too.’

‘So Luke was this gifted character that was a kid, but Luke also had this power that made him different and important.’ Sweeney had a knack of repeating my comments back to me in a way that made them seem more real, more concrete.

‘Now I’ve noticed something and I want to check it out with you.’ Sweeney liked to use phrases like, ‘let me check this out’; it felt collaborative. ‘Luke’s aunt and uncle had a family business, right?’

‘Yeah, it dawned on me as I was telling you that they had a family business and Luke went the other way. He didn’t want to be on the farm. But that wasn’t the part of the story where I felt a connection with Luke...’ (Savickas, 1995). My voice trailed off as I internally started wrestling with this new dilemma. It was very strange. I never really plugged into that dimension of Luke’s story before. Now that I had, it was an eerie revelation that caught me off guard. Did I want to find my destiny in a place other than Yarborough & Company?

WAVERING

My mind was in full-throttle overload. To this point in my career, I succeeded at almost anything I’d tried, but I recalled one painful failure from my teenage years. I quit a junior Olympic soccer team due to complications from a motorcycle accident. I swore I’d never repeat that mistake again. My college soccer career provided some atonement, but I never forgave myself. To quit is to lose—to fail—to feel shame. My heart pounded.

I’ve always envisioned making my mark on Yarborough & Company. I’d take it to new highs—show Dad what I could do. Show everyone I was a worthy successor. If I abandoned this goal, would it feel like when I quit before?

Sweeney drew me back into the present, ‘It seems you’re lost a bit in thought. Would you like a moment or are you in a place where you’d be comfortable sharing?’

I vomited the turmoil at his feet—not literally, but the feelings leading up to and after this purging were similar.

Sweeney eased the tone in the room. ‘It’s not uncommon, not by any stretch, that this kind of exploration churns lots of emotions and thoughts (Savickas, 1995). You’ve operated on career autopilot for an awfully long time. Whether by intent or by accident, it appears you foreclosed on a career choice at the expense of other options. To this point, you’ve limited yourself. As a result, it’s no surprise you might not feel as settled with your career choices as someone who spent time exploring more options’ (Marcia, 2002). Our conversation is causing you to use mental and emotional “muscles” that have long been dormant. You are in the midst of a dilemma—one that many people in this office experience. These thoughts, feelings, and emotions you are feeling might not seem normal to you, but I assure you they are.’

‘Thanks—I needed the reality check. But why do I feel the emotions so strongly?’

‘It could be any number of things, but see if this explanation suffices: you’re talking about things you’ve kept hidden from yourself—or you’ve tried to avoid them. As you articulate these thoughts and questions, the dilemmas become more salient.’

Sweeney continued, ‘Hero stories provide insight into the “scripts” you’ve chosen to guide your life (Savikas, 1995). The heroes you select and the stories that resonate for you will align with your beliefs about yourself and your environment (Savickas, 1998). You’ve chosen role models, heroes, and heroines that demonstrated ways to solve problems—ways that you accept and appreciate. It seems that Luke’s ability to save the day is important to you. Now that your family’s company is in a bind, it appears you want to save the day also.’

‘Definitely. I see my role in Yarborough & Company as the young kid who comes in and cuts down the enemy. I’ve been prepared by some of the best schools, I have great training and experience from my tenure at Michelin North America, and I’m supposed to lead them to victory.’

‘The question I have for you, then, is whether or not you’re working on the right dilemma.’

‘Say what?’

‘There’s a larger question that I think you’re avoiding. Regardless of your self-prescribed ‘duty’ to be Yarborough & Company’s savior, and regardless of those strategies necessary to accomplish this objective, do you want to work there? Are you motivated by the prospect of running Yarborough & Company?’

Our meeting drew to a close, but Sweeney had planted seeds I’d be thinking about until next time.

APPLYING SELF-KNOWLEDGE TOWARD THE QUESTION OF LEADERSHIP MOTIVATION

This session I was eager to demonstrate my self-awareness. I took stab at identifying my goal, the overriding goal we talked about during our first meeting. ‘Since I can remember, my goal has been to ensure Yarborough & Company succeeded. As a teenage captain of my soccer team, I thought about how my leadership on the field would translate to effective management of our family business. I decided to be an English major in college because Dad and I agreed that communication was essential for managers and good leaders. This company means so much to my Dad, its employees; I don’t want to let any of them down...’

Craig cut me off in a polite, but assertive manner, ‘And that may well be so, Preston. But in telling me your “goal”, you’ve only identified outcomes relevant to others. You said, “The company means so much [to them]” and “I don’t want to let them down”. We’re here to learn about you. What goal defines your movement through life?’

‘I guess I’m stuck again, Craig.’

‘That’s OK. We’ll work there layer by layer. Let’s back up a half step and review Preoccupying Themes.’ Sweeney flipped through his notes, ‘You feel at ease with yourself when you are victorious, right?’ I nodded. ‘When you are getting the kind of attention you want, you are comfortable.’

‘Yes.’

‘You feel important when you are brave.’

‘Yeah.’

‘And when you know what Dad knows, all is good with the world—because Dad knows what it takes to win!’ I smiled and a self-conscious laugh escaped.

Sweeney waited until we made eye contact, then he continued, ‘When you’re not victorious, you’re stressed.’

‘Sure.’

‘When you don’t get the kind of attention you want, life becomes really uncomfortable.’

‘Yeah, so?’

If you’re not brave, you don’t feel important—you feel irrelevant.’

My ears started burning.

‘When you realize that Dad might not know what it takes to win, your world turns upside down.

I felt humiliation welling up inside me—and anger not far behind. Inside my head I screamed, ‘Screw you, Craig!’ But I knew he was right. It sounded so juvenile—little boy tugging on Daddy’s pants-leg, ‘Daddy, Daddy... what’s happening? I’m scared.’ In spite of my education, my experience in a large corporation, in spite of all my professional development ... I still deferred to Dad like a sheltered little boy.

I wasn’t sure how much I missed of Sweeney’s comments, I could hear him talking but my mind was elsewhere. I tried to quickly catch up. ‘...Your role in the company is changing. Lots of time, attention, and energy have been invested in your taking the reins of Yarborough & Company.’

‘It’s been the entire focus of my professional life.’

‘Your professional life?’ Sweeney emphasized ‘professional’ such that I reconsidered my statement.

‘Well, I suppose it’s been a large focus of my life, period.’

‘I’d say so. How do you draw a distinction between professional development and personal development within your family business?’

‘You’ve got a point. The boundaries are diffuse.’ (Gersick et al., 1997)

‘Leadership requires vision, it requires commitment, and it requires a healthy belief in and acceptance of yourself (Bennis and Nanus, 1997). Those are not small things—not for a thirty-year-old or for a more seasoned veteran. Leadership is especially difficult when you’re facing a challenging market and you have the dynamics of a family business swirling around.’

Truer words haven’t been spoken.

‘We’ve discussed some of your central life concerns and we talked about identity issues such as your foreclosed career choice. Any additional thoughts you might like to add today?’

‘I’ve been thinking a lot about that. And I don’t like a big chunk of what I’ve identified about myself. Winning has always been important to me. And I think that I chose the path of least resistance that would enable me to win. I don’t mean that I was lazy. I’m not.’

‘No, I didn’t get that impression.’

‘But I also haven’t stretched myself in directions that I probably needed to. Given the market uncertainty that’s out there today, I wish I had developed a different foundation of experiences. What I mean is, Dad and I planned my education and career strategy based on a set of rules and expectations that are now becoming obsolete. I feel stuck—and part of me feels betrayed, too. Betrayed that the plan that Dad and I made together could not be honored. That the world has changed on us. Not only am I beginning to question whether my personal aspirations were totally in synch with the plan, but the world is conspiring to undermine my commitment to Dad and Yarborough & Company.’

‘And?’

‘This is Dad’s company. He built it, he hired people that fit his image of what the business should be, and they are a terrific group of employees and are very committed to him. But Dad’s views of the industry are out of phase with the reality of the industry.

‘I have a sense of what should happen, but probably don’t have the experience necessary to carry it off—and certainly not with Dad as a potential obstacle in the process. In short, I’m beginning to question whether I’d be a good leader for Yarborough & Company.’

‘You seem like a capable, intelligent person that could engineer a turn-around provided that (a) it were possible and (b) that you wanted to. I still haven’t heard whether you want this challenge.’

Sweeney let the silence hang until I stammered, ‘Well, I um, I won’t say that I don’t want it—but I wouldn’t say that I do want it, either.’

He continued, ‘The factors that go into your motivation as a leader have an impact on those who are members of your organization (Miner, 1978; Miner, Ebrahimi and Wachtel, 1995). If you are leading this family business because you want Dad’s approval and you want the easy road to a win—that has an impact on your followers. If you are entering into these turbulent times because you love a challenge and marshalling resources to attack it is in the fiber of your being—that also has an impact on your followers. If you were in a less challenging business environment, then perhaps this question isn’t as critical. But the fact is, you are.’

‘As a responsible leader, you need to check in with yourself and have a genuine, internal dialogue. Pardon my soapbox lecture—but as a leader, you’re at a critical juncture in your career and others’. All the leadership theories in the world won’t help if you’re not committed to the potential challenges of your leadership opportunity.’

‘I’ve been working toward that... it’s why I came here in the first place. But I would appreciate some guidance through this part of the process.’

‘We’ll do that. I just wanted to keep you posted on why we’re still focusing on you and not addressing specific business strategies and leadership questions that emerged when we first met.’

‘That is fine. I’m with you.’

‘Let’s also reconsider Luke’s story. You weren’t willing to accept it earlier, but Luke had a couple of dilemmas. Fighting against the enemy wasn’t the only conflict Luke had to face. He could have stayed on his farm and dreamed—this was an option. Luke had to decide whether to leave his family behind in order to pursue his potential. Luke chose to leave the farm ... what does that tell you?’

‘That for Luke to reach his goals, he needed the courage to step out...to seek other challenges and adventures.’

‘The anger you’ve felt in this session wasn’t directed toward me. You’re angry with yourself. You wouldn’t be angry if you didn’t think you were capable of pursuing dreams outside of your father’s vision.’

‘I know, but I’m not sure what I want.’

‘I have a hunch, but I’m not talking—it’s for you to discover. But I will say this: you can’t lead or manage others unless you are first able to lead and manage yourself. Once you determine what motivates you, the rest will fall into place.’ (Bennis and Nanus, 1997)

LINKING LEADERSHIP MOTIVATION TO OVERRIDING GOALS

‘What do you believe you need at Yarborough & Company in order for you to persist in spite of the challenges you face?’

‘I’m going to answer what I would want.’

‘Precisely.’

‘When you said that my world turned upside down when I realized that Dad didn’t know what it took to win—I wanted to fight. But I also realized you were right. And I felt the dependence that lingers to this day—for Dad’s approval, for his protection, for his guidance. I love that, but I also need to grow beyond it.’

‘If I were to stay at Yarborough & Company, and persist in the face of the present challenges, I would have to be the business’ primary architect. It’s not because the business needs saving—I used that language earlier, but I don’t think that’s entirely true. Said differently, I need the freedom to express my own ideas—express them independently of Dad. I want to be heard—I want to feel important because I’ve contributed something meaningful. I want to sit down at my own candlelight steak dinner and proclaim victory for what I’ve accomplished. And I want the victory to be all mine—not a copy of Dad’s.’

‘Okay, let’s slow it down a bit. Sweeney continued, ‘we’re going to reduce this down to three basic elements. The first one deals with your expectations; do you believe you can achieve what you hope to achieve if you give your best effort? Second, if you achieve those goals is there a valuable payoff for that achievement? Third, is that payoff something that you value or is it just something that you know that others consider valuable? (Van Eerde and Thierry, 1996; Vroom and Jago, 1978)

‘So let’s start at number one, do you believe you can achieve what you hope for if you give your best effort?’

‘Truthfully, I don’t. The market is dreadfully poor and leaves us little room for error. While I want to chart new territory, we don’t have the margin for developmental mistakes. I’m realistic enough to know that mistakes will happen.’

‘Okay, that’s fine, but let’s continue. If you achieved your goals, would there be a valuable payoff for your achievement?’

‘No concerns there. Dad has always been extremely encouraging of good performance. I know he would be thrilled if I were able to branch out and succeed.’

‘What kind of payoff would you receive?’

‘Probably money or a promotion. I think the most rewarding thing would be to hear him talk about how proud he was of me and my accomplishments.’

‘Is that payoff something that you would find valuable, or would it simply be something others find valuable?’

‘I don’t really care about the money. The promotion might be nice—but I’m not even sure that’s all that important to me. Because I’m in a family business, I feel promotions are kind of irrelevant. My name is on the side of the building. The thing that’s most important to me is Dad’s approval. I respect Dad and his opinion. It means a lot to me if he values what I’ve done.’

‘OK, Preston, reflect on our discussion and think about your overriding goal. What motivates you and what discourages you?’

‘I want to create my own success—in my own way and on my own terms. The only reward I really want is to feel respected and admired. Dad is the person that first comes to mind—I want him to admire my accomplishment—but I think that I want respect, period, for being my own man. Money and status are not that important to me—but I feel that if I work to my potential, both are likely to come. In sum, I’d say that accomplishing this goal is very important to me. I’d be willing to risk quite a bit if I truly felt like I had the opportunity to author my own success.’

‘But earlier, didn’t you say you didn’t think you could because the market wouldn’t allow it?’ I think I detected a bit of a wry smile at the corner of Sweeney’s mouth.

‘Yeah, I don’t think the market would permit that. But after thinking it through, I believe that I could permit it.’

‘Oh? Do tell.’

‘I can go out on my own. Dad’s the biggest fan I have in the world. He would understand if I left the company. He wouldn’t feel abandoned—he’s always said he only wanted me in the business if I wanted to be there. Lots of my pressure and foreclosed beliefs were self-imposed. I’ve learned that I really don’t want to be there. It’s not anyone’s fault—least of all his or mine. But I need to chart my own way. I have to feel like I’m making my own mark in the world—that my creativity and my energy has the freedom to be important on its own terms—not as a side-note to my father’s accomplishments.’

I had discovered that leaving the business did not have to be framed merely as whether or not I was ‘up to the challenge’. I had tapped into my overriding motivation—to be courageous and brave enough to pursue my own destiny (like Luke), to discover my own way of contributing meaningfully to others. I could see a clearer picture with more options. As Sweeney promised, much did fall into place.

My fixation with our company’s perils was an attempt to rationalize why I should be the architect of Yarborough & Company’s revival. I was realistic enough to recognize that Dad wouldn’t step aside freely—nor should he. We both had much to lose if things didn’t work out. And the odds were, given the state of our industry any significant mistake would hasten an ugly end. In the face of these dangers, I donned my hero’s cap and wished to save the day. But I felt deep down that such bravado was foolish—hence my internal dissonance.

Sweeney helped me understand that what I really needed was permission to vacate my foreclosed life plan. When I shed the cloak of foreclosure, I could begin to consider other options. I was able to frame the issue differently. Initially I permitted myself two choices: stay in the business and accept the challenge or retreat with my tail between my legs. After identifying my overriding goal it became easy to discern that I should leave Yarborough & Company and pursue career interests congruent with my need for independent self expression.

FINAL PARAGRAPH

Torbert and Fisher (1992) explored the benefits of autobiographical awareness and managerial development. While developing this manuscript, the first author revisited his experience and developed new insights into that chapter of his life. While this observation extols one benefit of autoethnography, the authors hope this story may generalize across many contexts so that people from varied backgrounds can develop insights from this experience. Family business successors can have a sense of what it is like to bear their innermost thoughts to an outsider. Also, while family business owners' and employees' stories will differ significantly from this author's, perhaps some of the themes and dilemmas that emerged in this story provide a non-threatening foundation for discussing sensitive topics. Executive coaches have an opportunity to consider a different method of working with a client—a model developed from cross-pollinating Adlerian Individual Psychology with Vroom's VIE theory. And finally, for any young person considering their career options, this author's 'coming of age' story emphasizes the importance of learning what his purpose was on his own terms. Leadership requires self-acceptance and courage. When one's career is aligned with an overriding goal, self-acceptance and courage falls into place and leadership naturally follows.

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