



# Who Do They Think You Are?

Transference in the Teaching Life

by Dr. Edward M. Hallowell

A republication of Ned Hallowell's "Who Do They Think You Are? Transference in the Teaching Life," a chapter from *Finding the Heart of the Child: Essays on Children, Families, and Schools* Book by Edward Hallowell and Michael G. Thompson. This piece confirms what we know to be true and what we have seen and heard from school leaders: in management, it's impossible to make everyone happy — particularly if you are serious about doing what you think is right.

## Foreword:

# Lessons from Marianne Constant

Back in the '90s, when David Torcoletti and I were beginning our school leadership roles at Northfield Mount Hermon School, we read Ned Hallowell's "Who Do They Think You Are? Transference in the Teaching Life," a chapter from *Finding the Heart of the Child: Essays on Children, Families, and Schools*. The piece confirmed what we were finding to be true: in management, it's impossible to make everyone happy — particularly if you are serious about doing what you think is right. Freud's notion of transference — that people will often project feelings onto a leader that come from that person's past, and do not have very much to do with the person on whom they are projecting these feelings — is something all leaders confront. School heads, department heads and other school leaders are subject to the transference from their faculty and staff, and while they can't stop that process, gaining some perspective on it, and recognizing how ubiquitous the process can be is helpful as one suffers the slings and arrows of outsized reactions to one's leadership.

Since then, we have both used the piece as reading for leadership trainings we've run, recommending it to new administrators, deans, division heads, heads of school, and trustees. The piece was written almost 30 years ago and the characters are of their time, but the underlying notion that leading is a challenge fraught with peril — and sometimes joy — is still true today.

The piece is the story of the fictional Marianne Constant, a retiring head of school, and the scene is her retirement party. The action moves from one party attendee to another, examining their thoughts and feelings about Marianne, and how each has a very different view of the same woman, ranging from the best thing to have ever happened to the school to the worst.

In these past years of leading in crisis — through a pandemic, in the midst of a nationwide racial reckoning, through sometimes brutal financial conditions — and a particularly volatile election season the story of Marianne Constant has been one I've recommended over and over. Sometimes you just need to be reminded it's not all about you. Realizing that human beings transfer all sorts of things onto others can be helpful as we try to move forward, build communities, and live lives in these complex institutions we call schools.

Many thanks to Ned for allowing us to share his work and to NAIS for allowing us to republish.

Moira Kelly  
President, EXPLO

*In management, it's impossible to make everyone happy — particularly if you are serious about doing what you think is right.*

**Dr. Hallowell's article can be used as a study guide for leadership teams.**



*Please find reflection questions throughout the text beginning on page 9 and on page 14 to use as conversation prompts with your teams.*

# Who Do They Think You Are?

## Transference in the Teaching Life

by Edward M. Hallowell

Scanning the tables, Marianne Constant knew exactly where she stood — or should it be said, where she sat? — for the first time since she took her job as head of Pilgrim Country Day School eleven years ago.

"Eleven glorious years," her husband had said that evening as they were dressing. Not quite glorious, she had thought to herself, that's not the word, but how sweet of Jack to have said so, particularly considering the back seat he'd had to take so often. Not glorious, she'd thought, but, in sum, good. She liked the term "in sum," feeling that it gave a formal certitude to the word "good," which was after all, a word she'd only just then settled on. In a different mood, at a different time, she might have chosen something quite different, something like "just ducky," or, "a day at the beach," or, "a real gas," something that would take in, in an ironic way, some of the resentment she'd felt at times over the eleven years. But this evening, as she'd strung her pearls around her neck, she'd settled on the simple sturdiness of "good," knowing that it didn't tell the whole story, but what word possibly could? What can you say after eleven years anywhere? It was good, it was bad, it was just what I'd hoped for, it was nothing like what I'd expected, it drained me completely, it replenished me daily, there's more that happened than you'd ever believe, I can't believe it's over. She had all of these thoughts in mind and more as she settled on the words, "in sum, good," as her motto for the evening, words she'd turn over in her head as the farewell banquet made its way from cocktails to dessert.



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Now she was between tournedos and baked Alaska, between Phillip Blakemore, head of the trustees on one side and Jack on the other, between farewell dinner and the next morning's moving van, which would take her family's belongings to Athens, Georgia, and the start of her tenure as writer in residence at the University of Georgia. She hoped the novel she would write there would also, someday, be, "In sum, good."

Around the room, others took in this moment for Marianne Constant in an array of inconstant ways. The special room in an old hotel near the Public Garden in Boston was full of the noisy chatter that can make these gatherings sound, from the outside, like a kennel. But inside people were lifting glasses and making passes and in general getting off their chests whatever they dared while saving the rest for well-wined reverie.

And the reveries were many. Charleston Montague, for a start, was chewing his meat with eyebrows raised at each bite as if the next one might be poisoned. Charlie Montague knew what it was to be betrayed, he could tell you, for betrayed he had been by the appointment of this woman he was on hand to honor tonight. The board of trustees had all but guaranteed that he would move from dean of students to head until, at the last minute, they'd come up with this forty-two-year-old woman, ten years his junior and ten generations of breeding his social inferior. Who did she think she was, this woman with the foolish last name, this pretender from South Carolina whose only claim to fame was that she'd written a novel nobody had read? And who did the school think it was, hiring her over him? What was she but a token, a blatant offering to those who felt Pilgrim was falling behind the feminist times? Well, hadn't he shown them, and her, what real character was by staying on, by not leaving in a snit when everybody else thought he surely would leave and have every right to leave and leave angry, too? But that was not the Montague way. One never quit. He, Charleston Montague, had stayed on in a valiant effort to maintain standards and uphold the academic rigor Connie, as he called her, so assiduously ignored. He accepted without rancor the demotions she handed him, knowing in his heart his cause was just. He felt she had never respected him, never even listened to him, really. But now, who was leaving? Who was attending whose funeral? He was attending hers. He had won. Now assistant to the director of development, he had positioned himself strategically. He had beat her at her own game.

What was not halting, however, was his determination to attend this dinner, no matter how socially awkward he may have felt, because of his admiration for "The Boss."

Bring on the new head, he thought to himself, inspecting his next bite of meat before popping it into his mouth. At another table sat Billy Talbott, a relatively obscure member of the class that had just graduated. He was trying to join in the conversations around him as best he could, but, since he was quite shy, his attempts were halting. What was not halting, however, was his determination to attend this dinner, no matter how socially awkward he may have felt, because of his admiration for The Boss, as the students called Marianne. Although no one knew where the nickname came from, as far as Billy was concerned it didn't begin to describe what a woman she was, a great woman in his eyes, the best all-around person he'd ever met, the smartest, the kindest, the fairest, and the best. He liked to close his eyes in assembly and just listen to her voice as it rolled over him like a wave of good news. Even though he'd never really talked to her, even though, in fact, they'd never actually exchanged any words at all, he felt as if he knew her perfectly, knew her maybe better than anyone, certainly better than her stiff of a husband, Jack. He had read all that she'd written, including her novel, several times. Some of the students didn't like her. Some of them thought she was just a figurehead, someone there just to raise money, to run the school like a business. Some of them thought she didn't really like kids, she just took the job for the prestige. But those kids didn't know her. He couldn't put it into words, exactly, and he didn't know just where the feeling came from, but he had a powerful sense that Marianne was with him, on his side and looking out for him wherever he went. And so tonight he was there, there for her, shy or not, to show in his own way his respect and gratitude.

In another part of the room Fats O'Malley was looking through the dainty portions for something he could call real food. Albert O'Malley, dubbed Fats by his brother at age ten, never stopped eating.

Except to teach English. And teach English he did, with greater gusto, enthusiasm, and flat-out braininess than anybody east of the Mississippi, or so they said. Fats had come to this preserve of Paleolithic Protestants, as he thought of Pilgrim Country Day, at the invitation of Marianne, and he had stayed on for two reasons, one open, one secret. The open reason was that the students, offspring of the bountiful boring though they be, were bright, very bright in fact, and so he had a chance to stretch as he taught, and to rescue perhaps one or two minds every year from the permanent cerebral calcification

Once Miss Marianne herself, as he thought of her, had told him that as much as she enjoyed his loyalty, she was able to speak for herself.

their birthright entitled them to. The secret reason was personal, so personal that Fats himself could not bring it into conscious awareness without the assistance of so much bourbon that he would forget it the next day. But the fact of the matter was that he stayed on at Pilgrim to protect and defend its head, his secret paramour, one Marianne Constant. Since he could outwit and outthink, not to mention outeat and outdrink, any opponent that might sally forth, as long as he stayed around, Marianne was safe. Once Miss Marianne had told him that as much as she enjoyed his loyalty, she was able to speak for herself. He had set off more than a few explosions at faculty meeting when he imagined someone beginning to attack the head. He took this not as a rebuff but as indirect encouragement to keep up his vigilant work.

Next to Fats — and it was physically difficult for anyone to sit next to Fats — but squeezed onto what little space was left on the chair to Fats' left was Lizbeth Ravenel, fellow English teacher and ardent admirer of Fats. Indeed, it wouldn't be unfair to say that Lizbeth loved Fats and would be in love with him if only he'd give her the slightest encouragement. But no, he had to devote all his prodigious romantic energy to mooning over that bitch at the head table.

Didn't he know how obvious it was and how foolish it made him look? And couldn't he see through her veneer of cultured urbanity to the gross, ambitious troll that lay beneath? What a joke she was. Little Miss Marianne. Little priss Marianne. Couldn't fight her way out of a paper bag. Whenever anyone attacked her she looked down at the ground and folded her hands. What rot! What did she think life was, Quaker meeting? And to boot, she treated Lizbeth so politely it made her want to punch Miss Marianne in the nose. It set the cause of women back a hundred years having the first female head of PCDS be such a wimp. She reminded Lizbeth of her sister growing up, always doing the sweetsie-sweetsie act but getting away with murder while it was Lizbeth who'd gotten all the spankings. But if little Miss Marianne thought for one minute that Lizbeth didn't see past the wimpy pose to the conniving bitch beneath, then she was sadly mistaken. She'd tell her so to her face if she ever got the chance, which didn't seem likely now that, mercifully and to the great praise of all that's fair in life, Marianne was moving on.

She still has more confidence. I hate her for it. No, I don't. I admire her. Do you have to hate everyone you admire?

Moving on, Maeve Harris thought to herself as she took a long sip of wine and looked down at Marianne. Maybe I should be moving on, too. There's a woman the same age as me and she's done more in a decade than I'll do in my lifetime. Maybe I should pack it in tonight, too. John wouldn't mind. God knows the kids wouldn't mind. Probably wouldn't even notice. Do they know their mother still teaches two classes of Latin? And would teach more if anyone wanted to take Latin? Marianne's kids know all about her work, I'm sure. Even though she jokes they don't, they must. What did Marianne do right that I did wrong? We both graduated from college in 1962. We both got married soon after that and started having children. But she had more confidence. She did new things. I haven't done a new thing since I don't know when. She still has more confidence. I hate her for it. No, I don't. I admire her.

Do you have to hate everyone you admire? Why does Marianne bring out such feelings in me? Why am I such a petty old woman? Old? Fifty-two isn't old. You can be sure Marianne Constant doesn't think of herself as old. So why do I? Why couldn't I have some of her energy, her facility with things? In a way it's been wonderful having her around, almost like having her here makes her a part of me that I'm proud of, only she's not part of me, but I look to her at times as if she were and I feel her with me without knowing it. But having her around

also reminds me of what I'm not. I don't honestly know if I'll be glad to have her gone or not. I don't know. What I feel about her is so complicated. Do I have any right to feel this way?

As Maeve Harris wondered over the complexity of her own feelings, Sam Rothman wondered about the school's. This place doesn't know her, never has, he thought to himself. Rothman, a trustee throughout Marianne's tenure, had seen her through much sound and fury. He was there for the great hiring controversy at the beginning, when many had opposed bringing a Southern woman to what had always been a Yankee man's job. He had stood by her through the challenges of the first few years when many parents, faculty, and alumni had wanted her to fail. He had helped her manage public opinion through the charges of sexual harassment that had turned the Upper School upside down. And it was Sam Rothman whom Marianne had called one night to ask if the school would be better off without her. "If I'm damaging this school, I'll get out right now," she'd said seven years ago.

"Don't do that," Sam said. "This school needs you badly."

"What should I do, Sam?" she asked

"Take over," Sam said. It was the same advice Sam's father had given him years earlier when his new business was faltering. Marianne had taken Sam's advice, so much so that most people thought of her as rather autocratic, even cold, very much The Boss, to use the students' term. But Sam knew better. Sam knew what a struggle it had been for Marianne, as it had been for him, to use authority, to take over. Once, when Marianne had said in an overheard conversation, "You know, I really like being in charge," Sam had known how insincere that statement actually was.

Be a bastard. These people need to know you're in charge.

Also sitting at Sam's table were Will Ogden and Amy Barette, both of the English department. The family backgrounds of these two teachers, both age forty-five, were quite different. The Ogdens were a wealthy family from the North Shore of Massachusetts. Mr. and Mrs. Ogden, Senior, began to disagree soon after they were married in the late 1940s, and they continued to disagree ever after. Marjorie Ogden seldom spent a happy day, losing herself for long periods in the throes of regret and sorrow for her life. Why was

there nothing to it but children and life's demands? She often would talk to her little boy Will about the various shor comings of his father while she wondered aloud if she

wouldn't be better off dead. Will, in his grade school years, tried to reassure his mother, patting her forearm gently and telling her he loved her, while also trying to conceal his tremendous fear that she actually might kill herself. At night he would pray that his mother might be happy.

The Barettes, on the other hand, were a poor family from a different part of the North Shore in Massachusetts. Sylvia Barette had five children. Her husband left her after the birth of the fifth, Amy. Sylvia worked two jobs and relied on friends and family to keep track of the kids while she was away. But, no matter what, she was home every night, and whenever she got home she would kiss each child, often fast asleep, goodnight. When Amy was a little girl, she discovered one day that she was poor when one of her playmates explained to her that neither of their families had much money and so they were called poor. When Amy asked her mother about this she said to her, "It is true we don't have much money, but what we don't have in money, we more than make up for in love. In fact, we outdo them all!"

The years had brought both Amy and Will into teaching and they are both at the banquet to say good-bye to Marianne Constant, but from very different points of view. Poor Marianne, thought Will, looking at his retiring head with sad, soft feelings. How hard she tried, but the school made it impossible for her. She could never put herself across and be heard. She always carried her sadness well hidden, but it was there, sagging within her like an empty dress on a hanger. I hope she'll be all right when she leaves. Without the school, hard as it was, she'll be so on her own. Can she make it? He shuddered, as if someone had just walked over his grave.

Simultaneous with Will's thoughts, Amy was looking at the head table and thinking, Marianne, you hot ticket. You've done it all here now, and you've still got time to go off and do a new gig in Georgia. You are so smooth. And you never made a big fuss about it, either. Just sailed in here, turned the place around, and now you're sailing on. Amy relaxed into a state of quiet good feeling about the departing head as she took in the conversation she was being fed by a diligent parent next to her.

You are so smooth. And you never made a big fuss about it, either. Just sailed in here, turned the place around, and now you're sailing on.

As the evening wore on, the room continued to swell with the private feelings and fantasies of all present even as the spoken conversation waltzed along politely taking up tame topics that veiled the more heated feelings within.

The dinner had attracted such a crowd that while the school had expected to rent only a small room at first, they'd ended up with the largest room available short of the Grand Ballroom, such was the emotion aroused by the departure of the head, and occasionally around the large room a brush fire would burst forth and you could almost hear the water glasses rattle their ice cubes as some fresh news shocked the table or some opinion was rushed up like a spinnaker in the wind.

"Why do you suppose it was," asked Mrs. Harrington, putting her knife and fork down for a moment, "that Marianne went ahead and hired Lucinda to teach third grade the very day after I cautioned her not to? It is because the woman is so independent," she went on, answering herself, quartering up the word, "independent" with her tongue as if with a knife. "She thinks to take another person's advice, particularly another woman's advice, is somehow to capitulate or kowtow. I think this school will do well to have a more calming presence in charge."

At another table, Gretchen Downs was in the middle of the long saga of indirect criticism of Marianne which no one else at the table could quite understand because Marianne had always been good to the controversial Gretchen, protecting her from the frequent attacks she received from parents and students for her arrogant, condescending, and cold manner. "Of course, we've been so lucky to have Marianne," Gretchen was saying, "considering the alternatives with which we were presented. Now, perhaps, the school will be ready for — how shall I say? — a leader who can really lead."

"But Gretchen," interrupted Jay Phillips from mathematics, "don't you think Marianne really has led? I certainly do. Look at how the school has changed..."

"Precisely," Gretchen interrupted back. "Look at how the school has changed. Willy-nilly. At the whim of the winds and whatever trustee had Marianne's ear. Not to take away from Marianne. She did the best she could."

"I don't understand you, Gretchen," Sally Finley from Gretchen's own department spoke up. "Marianne has defended you right and left, and now on the night to honor her you are attacking her."

Gretchen turned red and squeezed her fist. "I can assure you that Marianne Constant has never defended me. It was never defense, I can assure you of that. It is an old trick, to disarm your adversaries by appearing to aid them. But I knew better. She knew I had her number, so she tried to keep me at bay."

"That's paranoid," said Sally.

"Paranoid? My dear Sally, my dear young Sally, it is perceptive, not paranoid. As the years teach you the lessons of life they have yet to teach you, you will learn not to trust those who seem most kind and solicitous of you. You will learn that those people almost invariably want something, as Marianne has wanted something of me all along. Rather, you will learn to trust people who spit in your eye, and keep company with insults more easily than with sweet words."

"Gretchen, I really don't want to get into a tiff with you, but I can't understand what you think Marianne has wanted from you. I mean what could she..."

"Possibly want from me?" Gretchen interrupted, cocking her eye at Sally. "Well, since you put it that way, yes, what could she want from you?"

“She wants, my dear, what she knows she can never have. My admiration. My respect. She knows I see through her. She knows I know she is an intellectual sham. Early on, she had to decide whether to get rid of me or woo me. She decided, in a rather cowardly fashion, not try to get rid of me, so she began to woo me instead. But I am not easily wooed. Not by the likes of her.”

While others at Gretchen’s table intervened to change the subject, the emotion at Tony Capozzi’s table ran quite differently. Tony, a parent of first and second-grade boys, was recalling Marianne’s readings to the lower school. Tony, a house husband, as he called himself, sometimes stopped by school to listen to the stories. Tony was struck by how Marianne read just like his great Aunt Lucy. She had the same way of looking up from the book to emphasize a detail, the same voice, the same way of almost singing

When I listened to Marianne, it was like I was there as a kid again, and here were these stories, and I was wanting to hear them one more time.

the words. “I get worked up when I think about it,” he said. “It’s like when I was a kid and I’d want to hear the story one more time, one more time before I went to bed, it was my way of making time stop, and I’d look up at Aunt Lucy, and I’d say, ‘Again!’ and she would read the story one more time. They were the same stories Marianne reads, some of them anyway. Grimm’s fairy tales, The Wizard of Oz. I’d hear them again and again and I wouldn’t have to go to bed because I could say, ‘Again!’ and when I did go to bed her voice would stay with me. Now, when I listened to Marianne, it was like I was there as a kid again, and here were these stories, and I was wanting to hear them one more time, and Aunt Lucy, long dead, had given her work to Marianne Constant to cast the same magical spell over all the eager little heads and this one big head, listening as time stood still. It gave me the chance to connect back with that time and see my kids get it at the same time. What do I mean, ‘Get it?’” Tony asked the air. “I mean get the magic, the magic of a story and the experience of being able to go anywhere and be anything anytime all in your mind. One more time, again! Here’s a toast to you Marianne, again!”

At that, all the others at the table, moved by Tony’s impromptu, unintentional speech, raised their glasses and said, without missing a beat, “Again, here’s to you, again!”

*The processes of mind by which we turn other people into beings of our own creation are, like Aunt Lucy’s stories, many and magical.*

We concoct in our minds our own version of who the other person is. So often these feelings emerge from sources we can’t quite identify, like Billy Talbott’s for Marianne: “He couldn’t put it into words exactly, and he didn’t know just where the feeling came from, but he had a powerful sense that Marianne was with him.” Our feelings originate not only in the bits of reality the other person presents us with, but also in our own pasts and in the unconscious part of our own minds.

We begin by “meeting” another person. In that moment of meeting, of coming together, we bring our entire past histories to bear. As we focus on the other person, the new person, the person we are doing this thing to called “meeting,” we unwittingly see the new person in terms of all the other people we’ve ever seen before. We assign the new person a place in our minds almost immediately. We assign that place according to our catalogue of associations. There are some obvious categories that guide us at first: sex, age, appearance, accent, occupation. And then, as the meeting proceeds, wherever it may be, across seats on an airplane, on the dance floor, in a checkout line, over dinner, at a bus stop, or at a reception for a new head, and we gather emotion according to the details that emerge, a subtler system takes over, a system of categorization and rating that goes much deeper than the crude categories of age, sex, and job, and begins to ask and give answers to such fundamental questions as, Do I like this person? Is he on my side? Do I trust people with red-striped neckties? Where have I heard that accent before and did it make me fall in love or want to throw up? This subtle detection system and sorter of minute details is more sensitive and

complex than any mechanical early warning radar system ever devised. It picks through the millions of details one could focus on when one meets another person, and it selects the one or two it will choose to remember and make judgments by. No, I do not like red-striped-tie people. In my experience, seven out of ten have been snakes. Yes, I do remember that accent, and it confused me the last time as well because the satin-tongued jerk who had it was so

No matter how we may try to meet each new person afresh, we do see people in terms of people we’ve seen before.

seductive I almost fell for his act, but no, I definitely hate the accent. No matter how we may try to meet each new person afresh, we do see people in terms of people we’ve seen before.

If an entirely new personality walked into our lives, a personality totally unlike any we’d ever met before, we’d probably be unable fully to comprehend it at first. We’d be unable to deal with the person and we’d inwardly recoil, dismissing him or her as overpowering or weird or even evil as we groped for some points of reference.

We deal every day with understanding and misunderstanding each other in terms of people we have known before and relationships we’ve had before. This is not to say there is no new person, no new relationship; this is not to say that we go on repeating the same relationships over and over again, meeting the same people over and over again, although sometimes we have to be careful not to. Rather it is to say that the newness of a person or a relationship is apprehended but slowly, as it emerges from the disguises of past patterns with which we initially enshroud it.

The process is perhaps like getting to know a new piece of music. The first time you hear it, as you are carried

or jolted along by its melodies or dissonances, you are searching reflexively for a place to put this piece of music, a context, a frame of reference by which it can be known and apprehended. It sounds a bit like Mahler, you might say, with those mournful swellings in strings, or, if it’s a different type of music you might say it sounds a bit like the Beach Boys, particularly the choruses. I play a game with my wife in the car on long drives where we’ll tune in a classical station in the middle of a piece and try to guess the composer. As we zero in on it, we’ll hit a stand-off. “Haydn,” I’ll say. “No, Mozart,” she’ll say. Neither one of us knows enough music to be absolutely sure. When we get the answer, sometimes the announcer names a composer neither one of us has ever heard of, let’s say Antonio Piscalli, who thereafter will be known to us until, if ever, we get to know him better, as a composer who sounds a little like Mozart, a little like Haydn.

So, too, with people. As we encounter them we often begin silently guessing who wrote them, where they came from, who they are. As we listen to their melodies and their dissonances, we hear past melodies, past dissonances, and it is only gradually, if ever, that we let the new person take on his or her own identity. When I first heard Mahler I probably thought he sounded something like somebody else, and it was only over years that Mahler came to sound unmistakably like Mahler.

Psychoanalysts have various terms for the ways in which we distort one another in our own minds, or, to put it differently, the ways in which we create each other out of the raw material we see. Without dwelling on the terms, I simply want to call attention to the power of the phenomenon, because you all, as heads, teachers, counselors, or administrators, will be subjected to it from day one, even second one. In fact, you’re being subjected to it right now by people at your schools who haven’t even met you, but have learned a few bits of information about you. In their minds, right now, you are being created, conjured up, imagined in ways that I can assure you would surprise you. You might as well get used to being seen as someone who you think you’re not because it is happening to you all the time.

Of course, it has been happening to you all along, in whatever roles in life you’ve had up until now. It happens everywhere, amongst everybody, all the time. But it is particularly powerful, this phenomenon of creating or distorting others in terms of what we have known before — in other words, in terms of who we are — when those



*When recently have you found yourself comparing a new acquaintance to someone you know well? How has it affected your view of this new person?*

You might as well get used to being seen as someone who you think you're not because it is happening to you all the time.

others are in important positions, positions of responsibility, power, or authority, such as one's boss, one's teacher, one's department chair, one's head.

Such positions of authority and responsibility draw particularly strong feelings from people not only because of the power and influence they usually carry with them, but also because they tap into the primal reserves of emotion derived from our first relationships in life, our relationships with our parents. Our parental relationships often echo through our dealings with people in authority in adult life. Of course, there is not an exact correspondence; you don't feel toward your boss just as you felt toward your father and mother. But the phenomenon of distorting or creating others in terms of our own past histories has its roots in our original family relationships. We often repeat patterns in adulthood that were laid down in childhood. The authority figures in one's adult life become key figures in the drama, often serving as stand-ins for the key figures from childhood. Unconsciously we often look to people in authority in adult life for many of the things we looked to our parents or teachers or siblings for in childhood: approval and praise, regulation, discipline and even punishment, nurturance, guidance, security, reassurance, and protection.

A teacher might look to the head of a school for the approval he never received as a child, and so become pesteringly needy. An influential parent may treat their child's advisor abrasively, trying, unconsciously — this is all usually quite unconscious — to work out unresolved competitive feelings with a sibling or parent. A student may be terrified of a teacher, not because the teacher is very scary, but because the student is transferring feelings toward father or mother onto the teacher.

The head especially becomes the focal point of many eyes, some eyes trusting, others plotting, some eyes demanding, others wanting to serve, some eyes endorsing, others

desperately seeking praise. Peering through these many eyes, it can be hard to discern who the head really is.



*Most recently, in what ways have you found you are needed by those around you? What kinds of support does it seem like they most need?*

Look at the banquet for Marianne Constant. Who really is this woman? We know her age, her sex, her marital status, we know her occupation and her future work plans, we know her husband's name, and we know she came from the South originally and is headed back there. We know she is head of a large school called Pilgrim Country Day and we know that her retiring brought out a throng almost big enough to fill the Grand Ballroom at a hotel that sounds like the Ritz Carlton in Boston.

The head especially becomes the focal point of many eyes, some eyes trusting, others plotting, some eyes demanding, others wanting to serve, some eyes endorsing, others desperately seeking praise.

But what about all the rest we hear of her? Whom do we believe? Who is she? Other than her name, there seems to be nothing constant about her. And even her name changes. One person calls her Marianne, another The Boss, another Miss Marianne, another Connie, and others verge off into vulgar epithets. Everyone at the banquet seems to have his or her own version of who this head is.

Is she Gretchen Downs' sweet-talking intellectual fraud? Or is she Billy Talbott's best person there ever was? Is Sam Rothman right in saying she really didn't like power, or are the kids right who give her the name The Boss? Is she the ruthless incompetent Charlie Montague saw or the

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woman worth dying for, as Fats O'Malley imagined? Do her children keep up with her professional life, as Maeve Harris thought, or does she carry with her an inner sadness, hung, as Will Ogden saw it, like an empty dress on a hanger? Has her tenure at the school been filled with crises, like the ominous-sounding sexual harassment episode in the Upper School with which Sam Rothman helped her, or was her time the smooth sailing Amy Baretta imagined? Is she the unfeeling bitch Lizbeth Ravenel felt her to be, or is she the presiding presence, the warm-hearted story teller of Tony Capozzi's version?

She is all of these. And none of these. She is all of these, in that the members of the school community perceived her in these hugely disparate ways. Each of them created a Marianne Constant of their own. And she is none of these, in that each version derived from the subjective experience of its creator. No one version could be called definitive. Each version had in it bits of reality and bits of distortion depending on the point of view. Sam Rothman's father had told him to get tough at a key point in his life, and he had done so even though he hadn't liked it. So Sam assumed Marianne didn't like being tough either. We can only imagine what happened in Gretchen Downs' past to create her complicated feelings about Marianne. Maeve Harris, we might suppose, idealizes Marianne's life in counterpoint to her own depression. And so on down the list. Each person has his or her own reasons to see Marianne in a different way.

The real Marianne? That hardly matters to the assembled group, for they each have their own Marianne. It is striking how if you sit down and talk with the members of a school community, or any business or institution for that matter, about the person in charge you will get descriptions that are wildly at odds, shaded and distorted according to the pains and pleasures of the describer. And who is to say that

the real Marianne isn't the sum of the distorted versions, as if they were drawn on transparencies and laid one over the other with the image that emerges being the one that is true?

But there is at least one person who needs to know who Marianne really is, and that is of course Marianne herself. As long as she can retain a sense that there is a person within her independent of and unaltered by the eyes of the community, a person who has some internal definition that cannot be changed by external representation, then she will bear up well.



*What is your own internal definition? Which parts of that definition feel the most challenged in this moment by external representation?*

But even if she has a solid sense of who she is, how can she deal with the many different versions of herself others have? How, for example, can she deal with Gretchen Downs, who hates her more the nicer she is to her? Or how can she deal with Fats O'Malley, who moons over her and insists on being her protector when she really doesn't want one? Or what is she to do with poor old Charlie Montague, who keeps hanging on thinking he should be head despite abundant evidence to the contrary? And how does she counsel Billy Talbott when he sends her love letters, or how does she fend off Mrs. Harrington who is forever trying to tell her what to do, and is it OK for Tony Capozzi to keep showing up at her reading aloud time and standing at the back with a wistful look on his face?

You can't control what people think of you. You have some control of course, but you don't have complete control or anything close to it.

The general question becomes, How does a person in authority deal with the inevitable bits of personal craziness he or she will be thrown every day?

I have a few suggestions. First of all, don't take it personally. Recognize the phenomenon for what it is. Psychoanalysts call what we have been discussing transference, but you can just call it mishigas and leave it at that. Just know that everyone has their own mishigas, their own personal craziness, and when you get a face full of it, don't take it personally. As hard as it is to do, remember that the other person is coming from places you don't know about and is dealing with old conflicts and hurts you cannot know of. So, for example, when it gets back to you that Gretchen Downs thinks you are a fraud, don't think, 'Oh, my God, she's found me out.' Think instead, 'There must be some bomb in Gretchen that I detonate. Better watch out.' Or, when a Sam Rothman insists that you fear power, don't think, 'Is there something about me that exudes timidity?' Think instead, 'I wonder what happened in Sam Rothman's life to compel him to see me as someone who doesn't like power.' Or when a Maeve Harris or a Billy Talbott treat you as if you're just about perfect, take strength from their support but believe them at your peril. Remember also, in not taking these perceptions personally, that there may be something to learn about yourself in some of them. That is to say, remember that they may be at least partially true.

A corollary to the suggestion not to take it personally is the following: You can't control what people think of you. You have some control of course, but you don't have complete control or anything close to it. If you are a female you will stir feelings in some people about that, regardless of who else you are or what else you do. And if you are a male you will stir feelings in other people, regardless of who else you are or what else you do. If you are unmarried you will draw some attention for that, no matter who else you are or what else you do. And if you happen to be that most politically incorrect of all species, a white male heterosexual

Protestant, you will catch certain feelings about that, no matter who else you are and what else you do. You cannot control what people will think of you.



*What parts of other's perceptions of you are at least partially true? Which feel the least true? What might you learn from both perceptions?*

These days — and I am writing this paragraph in 2021, some 25 years after I wrote the original essay — the matter of others' judgments has become a veritable shooting gallery. You can feel caught in a crossfire all day. No matter what you say or do, you risk offending someone. Unfortunately, tolerance and civility have been in rapid decline for years, while public accusations, given the megaphones of social media, have become our daily bread. This is not a matter of transference as much as it is a matter of changing mores, such that hurting another person is no longer regarded as wrong, mean, or out of bounds but rather justified and in the service of advancing some cause or another. In its most base and primitive form, it becomes sport, a publicly sanctioned form of sadism by which people delight in watching another person go through hell.

However, there is some hell you can avoid simply by knowing that you are not necessarily the bad person "they" say you are. Even though you can't control what others think or say about you, you can, if you work at it, control what you think and say about yourself. This is the wisdom of Epictetus and Stoicism, which goes back to classical antiquity.

A second suggestion is to remember that in your role you are larger than life. As a teacher or administrator, and especially the higher you climb on the school's ladder of authority, you will be a special person, a strong and powerful person in the eyes of many, from first graders to parents to faculty as well. Even if you feel like an ordinary person, and I do hope you will retain your humility in this job, even if you feel ordinary, remember that others look at you as being larger and grander than that. You will understand their responses better if you keep that in mind. Third, try to know the other person's pain. Everyone has pain. Try to know of it in those you deal with. Think of where they hurt, where they have hurt. You will then understand them better, help them better, forgive them better. As you wrestle with another person's craziness, try to know the pain from which it comes.

*I would like to end not with my own thoughts but rather by paying a final visit to Marianne Constant. Some time after the farewell banquet she agreed to be interviewed by a man interested in the lot of a school head.*

"I was always more of a teacher at heart than I was a head," she began. She was sitting in her backyard in Athens, Georgia. Her hair was up in a bandanna, and she had drops of yellow paint in the hairs on her forearms. Her halfpainted porch backdrop dropped the conversation. "Why I left teaching I really don't know," she went on. "It's like painting this porch. It needed to be done. I guess I felt a sort of 'duty calls,'" being the first woman offered the job at PCDS. I know when I got the job I felt a combination of elation and fear. I was thrilled, but I also started lying awake at night, thinking of parts of the job I didn't feel prepared to do, like budget-making and disciplining faculty. Fortunately, I had good people to help with the money, so that worked out OK. The faculty problems? To this day I don't understand why some people insist on backbiting rather than problemsolving face to face. I tried to learn not to take it personally. But that's very hard. You need a shoulder to cry on and there's none built into

There are so many demands on you from so many places that you can really feel like building a wall around you. But don't do it. Stay open.

the job. Not the trustees, not the assistant head, not the faculty, and certainly not the parents and students. You are there to give to all of them. You can't ask them to prop you up, at least not directly, or at least not very often. You have to have supports away from work." The warm Georgia wind blew a few strands of her hair in front of her eyes, and she brushed them away.

"The best of it was the kids," she went on. "Seeing them grow. I know it's a cliché, but it's true. The look of excitement and curiosity in their eyes every day made up for all the angry phone calls. It was harder being head, being that much more removed from the kids than I was as a teacher, but I was still like Conrad's secret sharer, there with them,

on the sidelines, urging them on, making the place safe, or at least I like to think so. If there's a grandness to the job, it's that: You protect and you nourish, often behind the scenes, but it's scary when you think of it because you're everywhere. Your stamp is on everything. The school becomes tinged with your color everywhere. Of course it can all be wiped away, but for the time you're there, like it or not, it's you.



*Which parts of the school most bear your stamp? Which of these would you most like to wipe away? Which do you most hope will endure?*

"Did I like it? Yes and no. How can you not? Despite what Sam Rothman thinks, I loved the power. The chance to get things done. Other days I hated it, all the headaches. The worst of it was being misunderstood, being betrayed. I'll never forget one of the trustees looking me straight in the eye and flat out lying about a matter that is now of no more importance than that ant on your shoe, but was of great importance to me at the time." Her voice drifted off. Then she slapped her thigh and remembered a few stories which are too long to tell right here. "What advice would I have?, you asked," she said, taking a drink from a tumbler of iced tea she had poured. "First of all, I'll give you this recipe, since you asked for it. Mash up a lot of mint with a lot of sugar and lots of lemon juice into a sort of syrup, add a slug of whatever whiskey you have around, and stir it into a pitcher of tea and ice cubes.

"Advice for heads is harder. You know, I don't really like giving advice straight out like a wizard or something. But I guess since now I'm nothing but an aspiring southern writer I can tell you what I'd tell myself if I were still there. Keep the door open. Don't withdraw. There are so many demands on you from so many places that you can really feel like building a wall around you. But don't do it. Stay open. Let the people have access. That's all they really want. Do that, and get your own self taken care of in your own way, and you'll be pretty well off, I should think." She then pushed her hair back up under her bandanna, finished her iced tea with a long draught, gave me a water-pumping handshake and went back to her porch-painting, saying goodbye to all that for now.

**Dr. Hallowell's article can be used as a study guide for leadership teams. Leaders can be held in suspicion by their communities and we believe good conversation and reflection can help inoculate individuals and team members from some of the more deleterious effects on morale and confidence.**



## Discussion Questions

- 1. Have you ever found yourself positing intentions or motivations on leaders for their decisions or even how they present themselves?**
- 2. Have you ever received feedback about your leadership that has surprised you?**
- 3. People in school communities assign attributes to their leaders. This is so common that it likely serves a function. What might that function be?**
- 4. What is the harm to you, the school community, and the leader to this kind of baseless judgement?**
- 5. As leaders, since some of this kind of projection is inevitable, how do we insulate ourselves from some of its most negative effects?**

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Edward (Ned) Hallowell, M.D. is a board-certified child and adult psychiatrist and world authority on ADHD. He is a graduate of Harvard College and Tulane Medical School, and was a Harvard Medical School faculty member for 21 years. He is the founder of The Hallowell ADHD Centers in Boston MetroWest, New York City, San Francisco, Palo Alto and Seattle.



Photo by Rayon Richards

He has spent the past four decades helping thousands of adults and children live happy and productive lives through his strength-based approach to neurodiversity, and has ADHD and dyslexia himself.

Dr. Hallowell is a New York Times bestselling author and has written 20 books on multiple psychological topics. The groundbreaking *Distraction* series, which began with *Driven to Distraction*, co-authored with Dr. John Ratey in 1994, sparked a revolution in understanding of ADHD.

Dr. Hallowell is the host of a podcast called *Dr. Hallowell's Wonderful World of Different* where he celebrates the world of different in its many and varied forms. In celebrating the many differences that adorn humanity, he hopes to break down barriers of stigma and misunderstanding and show how all of us benefit from the differences between us.

Dr. Hallowell has been featured on *20/20*, *60 Minutes*, *Oprah*, *PBS*, *CNN*, *The Today Show*, *Dateline*, *Good Morning America*, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Newsweek*, *Time Magazine*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Boston Globe* and many more. He is a regular columnist for *ADDitude Magazine*.

Dr. Hallowell lives in the Boston area with his wife Sue and they have three children, Lucy, Jack and Tucker.