

# Embracing the Strength in Difference

**LAURIE A. WADSWORTH, PhD, Pdt, FDC<sup>a</sup>**

<sup>a</sup>Department of Human Nutrition, St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, NS

## ABSTRACT

Being different is neither right nor wrong; it is just different. The dietetic profession as part of society holds many differences. These can be divisive, but learning to recognize the strengths that differences generate could lead to a stronger professional future. Three points arose when reflecting on professional experiences of a career of more than 3 decades. Recognizing different ways of creating and gathering knowledge, leading individuals and teams, and valuing the past as well as the future, will provide opportunities to explore our differences as individuals and as a profession. These themes appear at the intersections of values that could initiate inclusion or exclusion. Learnings from these intersections note that growth can occur even in the midst of adversity. Without understanding the junctions in our professional pathways, futures planning may not build upon the foundation of strengths, experiences, and values present within our profession. Learning to be a risk taker, to walk into the fear, has helped Laurie to shape a career that feels satisfying and successful. Suggested techniques to energize individual careers are provided.

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## RÉSUMÉ

Être différent n'est ni bien ni mal; c'est seulement être différent. La profession de diététiste en tant que partie de la société présente de nombreuses différences. Celles-ci peuvent être source de discordance, mais apprendre à reconnaître les forces que confèrent les différences pourrait améliorer l'avenir de la profession. Trois points ont été soulevés lors de la réflexion sur les expériences professionnelles issues d'une carrière s'étalant sur plus de trois décennies. Reconnaître les différentes façons de créer et de recueillir des connaissances, de diriger des gens et des équipes, et de valoriser le passé comme le futur nous donnera l'occasion d'explorer nos différences en tant qu'individus et en tant que profession. Ces thèmes apparaissent aux intersections des valeurs qui pourraient être à l'origine de l'inclusion ou de l'exclusion. Or, les leçons tirées de ces intersections indiquent que la croissance peut se produire même dans l'adversité. Sans comprendre les carrefours rencontrés dans nos parcours professionnels, la planification de l'avenir ne saurait s'appuyer sur les fondements que sont les forces, les expériences et les valeurs présentes au sein de notre profession. Apprendre à prendre des risques et à affronter la peur a aidé Laurie Wadsworth à façonner une carrière satisfaisante et fructueuse. Des suggestions de techniques pour dynamiser sa carrière sont offertes.

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## INTRODUCTION

To begin, I want to acknowledge the work for this lecture and paper was completed in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded lands of the Mi'kmaw people. Also, I have benefited from colonization. Five generations of my family lived on homesteads, farms, towns, and cities in southern Saskatchewan on Treaty 4 and Treaty 6 territory, the traditional territory of the Cree, Salteaux and Assiniboine First Nations and homeland of the Metis Nation. For 3 generations family members have worked for CP Rail, a railway that played a role in the extermination of the buffalo and disruption of the traditional ways of life for many Indigenous peoples.

A student once introduced me to her parents by saying that if I hadn't been a dietitian, I'd be a storyteller. I now recognize that I am both. Through stories and evidence, I will share some key learnings and challenges discovered from my varied career. The focus surrounds the theme of "strength in difference". This will comprise different ways of knowing, leadership diversity, and valuing diverse history. Readers will be left with 4 challenges to energize their careers.

### A professional journey

I wanted to do it all. My excursion through dietetics has involved food service management, inpatient and outpatient counselling, work with food industry, government roles in

public health nutrition and health promotion, and education and research in a dietetics and nutrition degree granting program. From the outside, this career path might appear easy. It wasn't always. Would I change anything? No, since that would make me a different person and reduce the richness of learning from the hurdles encountered along the way. Yet, during training I was told I wouldn't make a good dietitian. As with the physiotherapist years later who suggested I cut my hair instead of relearning how to braid it after a major elbow break, my reply was simple, "just watch me." Such comments, though initially perceived as harsh, fueled forward progression for both my rehabilitation and my career. The comments from the training supervisor confirmed my passion for this profession and that I would tenaciously hold on and find success and not see this career end before it began.

A line from *Eat, Pray, Love* [1] stated, "Ruin is the road to transformation." With transformation comes growth. Choosing to learn from failures and not only successes takes courage, yet can develop a form of success from all adversity—as long as we choose to grow.

Hexagram 47 from the *I Ching* represents overcoming adversity [2]. It resembles a small evergreen growing inside a box. Everyone can learn that though adversity may look like the opposite of success, if we choose to learn from the barriers in our way, we can grow. It is all a matter of outlook.

I challenge myself and others to take the opportunities that present themselves, and whether these result in failure or success, choose to grow from the experience.

Being at Dietitians of Canada (DC) annual conferences has felt like being home, surrounded by others who love this profession as I do. Twice I gained strength from that warmth of home feeling when family members passed away while I was either chairing board meetings and speaking at the annual conference or presenting keynote addresses at Prairie Research Days. While I felt sad and alone, when I looked up, I found myself in the midst of my professional family—a family, yet not without its wee dysfunctions <smile>.

## STRENGTH IN DIFFERENCE

When choosing a title and theme for this lecture, the term “difference” was chosen specifically for its multiple meanings [3]. It can mean change, as in things can be altered. It can mean dissimilar; the dietetics profession is not a homogenous group. It can mean disagreement; members of the profession do not hold the same opinions. While these could be sources of tension, I believe these differences can strengthen our profession.

### Different ways of knowing

Let me tell you about an encounter I had with a very different philosophical viewpoint. When completing my doctoral research in the mid-1990s, I spent time with a colleague detailing the use of qualitative research methods to explore nutrition and body image messages in televised media. After a pause, the response was, “They’re giving you a PhD for that?” While disappointing, this response was not surprising. At the time, I only needed my 2 hands to count the Canadian dietitians actively working with these methods. That comment began a long career of advocating for the basic understanding of different types of research or ways of gathering knowledge.

Two key words related to knowledge are epistemology and ontology [4, 5]. Epistemology involves what can be known and how knowledge can be acquired. It is often referred to as ways of knowing. Ontology refers to what constitutes reality and is closely intertwined with epistemology. These 2 concepts cannot be easily separated and together form what we can call our individual philosophical stance. It should be noted that how we find knowledge impacts “what” and “how” we communicate. Words carry power. An examination of our personal philosophical stance can show our biases, or as stated by Clancy Harrison [6], can show where we have been “blinded by our own privilege”.

Our comfort levels with what constitutes knowledge fit along a continuum with anchor points of naturalist and positivist [4]. Those nearest the positivist end, tend to see the world in dichotomies—right/wrong, healthy/unhealthy, and so on. Those nearer the naturalist end live

where multiple views are acknowledged and valued, using words like “both” or “and”.

Living in the pluralistic world of postmodernism seems much more comfortable to me than the binary world of modernism. Modernism can be visualized as a skyscraper of squares and rectangles inside other squares and rectangles. Postmodernist architecture uses straight lines with some curves added, such as the Guggenheim Museum in New York or the Opera House in Sydney, Australia. Not everyone will feel comfortable without the staid structure of modernity. That’s OK. Remember, there is strength in difference.

Yet, working in a medicalized profession, I often felt like an outsider when focused on public health nutrition, health policy development, and dietetics education. Even working in a Faculty of Science conducting research more firmly rooted in Humanities and Social Sciences had its challenging moments. Imagine speaking to a chemist, mathematician, or physicist and trying to explain the value of research that examined the role of food in negotiating self-identity in the *Sex and the City* television series [7], or defining food insecurity as an outcome of policy failure in the movie *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs?* [8], and now as I move to the next stage of this career as an historian exploring the Victorian roots of the dietetic profession [9]!

Epistemological challenges arise when valuing research via various forms of grading algorithms that rank research evidence. These often prioritize positivist research over naturalist [10]. Yet, as a postmodernist, I find knowledge from the whole continuum of use to practice guidance. Often the qualitative methods studies give voice to dietetic professionals and the publics we serve. I’ve often asked myself, “How is this not important?” Perhaps there are other ways to assign value to studies that move beyond the confines of traditional epidemiology. Devaluing the work of many members within the profession can be seen as a form of horizontal violence or peer-to-peer bullying [11, 12]. It is possible that this leads to exclusion and even loss of some members from the profession and the professional association.

Similarly, recent discussions in the science community from the positivist end of the continuum, have called into question the misuse of statistical significance, where this is used solely to prove or disprove a hypothesis. A commentary in *Nature* [13] was written by 3 authors but supported by over 800 signatories in agreement that this conversation needed to begin. On the cover of the issue, the concept was termed “value misjudgement.” It should be noted that the broader conversation does not suggest removing statistical significance, but instead suggests a reduction of the importance placed only on level of significance in research reports [13].

Both ways of judging the value of research, ranking schemes or statistical significance, will be tough research conversations, but ones that need to occur. Since the dietetics profession is an evidence-based profession, it must be part of these conversations both within the profession as well as the profession being part of the larger conversations.

## Leadership diversity

I am an introverted dietitian without an internship; yet, one that is seen as a leader. What is a leader? Brown offered the definition, “anyone who takes responsibility for finding the potential in people and processes, and who has the courage to develop that potential” [14, p. 4]. I learned to lead from within a group instead of being out front or herding from behind. This inclusive leadership style allowed me to understand what others see and say from their perspective and to build trust by valuing their input.

What is often termed “quiet leadership”, can be innovative and effective. Leaders with introverted tendencies include Barrack Obama, Elon Musk, Mahatma Gandhi, Rosa Parks, Eleanor Roosevelt, Steven Spielberg, and Bill Gates [15]. Each achieved success in their undertakings.

Adam Grant, an organizational psychologist, studies leadership styles. He found that introverted leaders outperformed extroverted leaders, particularly when leading proactive people willing to present and discuss ideas and to take initiative [16]. Both introverted and extroverted leaders can be successful but the key seems to be the types of teams or individuals they manage. The addition of this knowledge has challenged the dominant extroverted leadership paradigm found in the business literature prior to the work of Grant and others in the field. Again, this shows the strength in diversity. However, I would posit that use of the terminology “quiet leadership” may do a disservice to such leaders.

All leaders will face difficult situations. Dealing with the difficult questions takes a courageous leader. Brown stated, “Daring leaders who live into their values are never silent about hard things” [14, p. 185]. She termed choosing our own comfort over a difficult conversation as the “epitome of privilege” that will only maintain the status quo. Let me provide an example of a “hard thing”.

In a classroom conversation about equity, poverty, and power, a student shared a story of a panhandler on Spring Garden Road in Halifax. Her mother passed him every day on her way to and from work. One day she stopped to offer him a part-time job at the store she managed. He thanked her, but refused her offer, telling her he could make more money sitting on the street. The class was shocked that anyone would turn down such an offer. At that point, I had to decide whether to go with the judgement of the majority or move the conversation in a different direction; one that examined what I saw as the “hard thing” at the centre of the story. After a deep breath, I chose to walk into the discomfort and asked, “What does it feel like to live in a nation where someone can make more money begging on the street than in a minimum wage job?” Seeing the puzzled, angry, and shocked looks on their faces, made me smile internally; cognitive dissonance is a key part of adult learning. As the conversation continued in the days that followed, it became clear that they had begun to understand their position of privilege.

## Value of diverse history

As stated in the novel, *Sarah's Key* [17], “We are all part of our history”. This quotation holds much in just 7 words. I find it humbling for someone moving into a new niche of practice as an historian to be part of this celebration of our professional history. Without valuing our history, we cannot critically reflect nor can we move forward productively. The goal is not to run in circles making the same errors, but that we understand how problems were handled in different time settings, and use that knowledge along with our present knowledge to elevate our solutions.

Assuming that topics have not been previously studied or encountered merely by not finding them in an internet search will leave us with far less information with which to tackle the difficulties that we encounter. Sadly, not all knowledge of the past has been digitized even by major journals, publishers, and libraries. This may be where valuing the experience of the silver-haired members of DC comes to the fore. We should make them part of our story beyond the stereotype of being ill or disabled. They are the repositories of much past knowledge for our profession and professional association.

Ageism is a process of discrimination against a person based on their age [18]. It finds roots in judgement and results in stereotyping. We know not all Millennials are the same, nor all Boomers alike. Yet, our society—and thus our profession—is rife with such categorizations. How often do we see older adults in mainstream magazines, online catalogues, or websites? When we see them in movies, television series, or online, how often are these portrayals of inept, feeble, cranky, or comedic characters? Given the growth in the proportion of people over the age of 60 in populations around the globe [19], the invisibility in media of healthy active aging adults seems especially egregious since many people make major contributions to society after age 65. Roget completed the Thesaurus after age 70 [20]. Alice Munro won the Nobel Prize for literature in her 80s [21]. Maye Musk, a fellow dietitian is a CoverGirl at the age of 70 [22]. In Canada almost 200 million volunteer hours each year are provided by aging adults over the age of 65 [23].

I recall a featured column from an Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics publication that asked a practice question of dietitians. Each column included 3 responses from members at different points in their careers—early, middle, and late career. I enjoyed this column for valuing members across ages and years in practice. To cite the title of the Ryley-Jeffs lecture presented by Mary Bush [24]—“Imagine a world where...” DC did something like this in a newsletter or blog at least every quarter to embrace our differences. Wouldn't that be cool?

## MY CHALLENGES TO YOU

These challenges provide techniques that might help to energize your unique career and get past any barriers encountered.

## Strive for innovation

A quotation attributed to my favourite artist, Vincent van Gogh states, “Normality is a paved road; it’s comfortable to walk, but no flowers grow” [25]. I often think of van Gogh as someone who was able to take his pain and transform it into something truly amazing, something that shows everyone a different view of the world.

Try new things to keep the mind fresh. On my 50th birthday I challenged myself to do 50 new things in the following year and I still do this each year. New things in life can help us to see from different perspectives and to understand the world around us.

## Be open to opportunities

Change presents opportunity. With opportunity comes a degree of trepidation, which results in a desire to be cautious. Be an informed risk taker and remember that plans take time. In the words of LL Cool J, “Dreams don’t have deadlines” [26].

## Be a mentor

Learning is a reciprocal and participatory process. It doesn’t flow only from instructor to student but between and among all involved. Due to its reciprocity and participatory nature, I find mentoring rejuvenating. It is our professional duty to build a strong future profession. Mentoring can make this happen. In a happy role reversal, my mentors have often been former students.

## Hold onto the passion

On difficult days, reconnect with the passions that brought you to the profession. Perhaps keep a self-esteem file where you can keep the notes, comments, and ideas that remind you of your value in this profession. I have found another quotation attributed to van Gogh to be truly affirming when said aloud. “I’m seeking. I’m striving. I’m in it with all my heart” [27].

## CONCLUSION

My goals are to continue to instil in others the satisfaction of finding a profession that fuels one’s passions, brings joy in diversity, and provides the privilege of working with many outstanding people. I, like others, stand on the shoulders of giants—including the iconic women, Miss Violet Ryley and Miss Kathleen Jeffs.

Click [here](#) for the playlist to accompany the lecture topics. 🎵

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