

A much needed connection to my community.

While I returned from the conference reenergized, I almost didn't go.

I was quite ambivalent about the conference. I wasn't presenting as I normally would and I had a research report that needed to be delivered, a full plate of other tasks that I was behind on and the Loonie was low to the Greenback.

Much of the content of the report I was working on was troubling. As sometimes happens when things are meant to be, out of the blue, I received a Researchgate notification that Michael Nunno had endorsed me for case study research. I was stunned. Not only was I knee deep in his research at moment, he was the only person I could think of who might be able to help me untangle some of the issues I was coming across analyzing my own research. Somehow, suspending my generalized malaise with academia, I thanked him and asked if he'd talk to me about my findings. Not only did we talk, and he provided me with timely and important insights, he offered to be of further help if I needed it. Towards the end of our phone call, I was left with the feeling that I was talking to an old friend. I was, and still am so touched by the generosity and genuineness with which he offered to be of assistance and support to me. He suggested that I come to the conference, promised that we would talk again and when we said goodbye, he quickly fired off an email with a number research articles, along with a conference brochure and encouraging me to attend.

While it sounded interesting, I really didn't have the time and I wasn't sure what the program had to offer. However the draws for me were clear, I wanted to spend time with Michael Nunno and have an opportunity to pick his brain. And besides, I was looking forward to being able to spend time with Laura Steckley. I've long wanted to meet Martha Holden and the opportunity for these interactions convinced me. More of an introvert, I often find conferences exhausting. Mostly, I give one or more presentations and then spend my time catching up with people I've come to know over the years. I rarely leave feeling recharged or even that it had been a learning experience in any deep way. But I did go, and Lake George was different, in very many ways. Mostly it was because of what I gained from the depth and breadth of discussion. Importantly, was the true spirit of scholarship, community, and practice discipline, the generative sharing that was evident by everyone I encountered that made it a true learning community of practice.

When I arrived at the conference and my room wasn't ready. Hungry from travelling, I went in search of the hotel restaurant and ran right into James Anglin, who was sitting with Michael on the back patio. I said a quick hello and James directed me to the food and off I went. I enjoyed my sandwich, looking out onto Lake George and thinking how pleased I was to see James again. The first community of practice meeting was held shortly after my lunch and I was thrilled to sit down beside Ruth Emond with whom I had not connected since we chatted a dinner away in Scotland. Laura came in a bit late and we held a roundtable of discussion. Within minutes we were talking about gut bacteria and children's mental health and the state of the food we are feeding children in care and I knew I had made the right choice to come. Anyone who has talked to me in the last five years would have heard from me the phrase 'if the past decade my focus has been neuroplasticity, the next decade it will be on gut bacteria'. It was clear to me that I was with my people and we were all speaking the same (language) codes about caring for vulnerable young people.

There were so many people with whom I had interesting moments of connection. Sometimes you meet people and within a few words you feel you want to know them. That was the case with a Law Professor, and an implicit knowing of our shared passion led to an engaged discussion and an intention to connect again. She revived for me a long-held fantasy of a writing retreat. Over a meal with a practitioner from Massachusetts I was moved when she shared with me her despair at a growing heroin crisis in her community. Just a few words of hello, quickly led to an hour-long conversation that was all the easier for our mutual understanding, language and knowledge-base rooted in our common experience. It was interesting to learn of her practice and hear of her struggles. It was confirming too to listen to her deep passion and resolute conviction for the work. I didn't see her before or after, but I left knowing that a kindred spirit was out there, doing the good work, serving the children and youth in Massachusetts who are struggling with the sequela of poverty and the spiral of addiction.

I was enriched by the experience. I was affirmed by the reconnection and new connection with others who share a similar passion. I was inspired by the generative approach to engagement I was refreshed by the opportunity to talk deeply, reflecting on theory. I responded to being encouraged, accepted and welcomed and was humbled by the chance to spend time considering ways of working together with so many passionate, caring and brilliant souls.