

## **MALS: Providing a New Pattern Language for My Life**

Natasha Lee, Spring 2015

In my final semester in the MALS program at UNCG, I studied patterns for ecological and sustainable communities in Dr. Charles Headington's course *Livable and Sustainable Cities*. The primary text for this course was *A Pattern Language* by Christopher Alexander, Sara Ishikawa, and Murray Silverstein. In this book, the authors describe common problems that prevent people from connecting with each other and living sustainably. In each new pattern, they propose a solution that seeks to solve the problem and create a better life. The authors typically seek to create communities and spaces that are of the human scale. Although *A Pattern Language* was written for cities, buildings and homes, I have found the book to be an appropriate metaphor for my experience in the MALS program at UNCG. In each course I have found new patterns that I have used to change the way I live and interact with others around me. These patterns have encouraged me to live a more intentional, authentic, and congruent life. These changes have enriched both my personal and professional life, and I believe will continue to guide me.

As *A Pattern Language* was written to make changes in different parts of society, so have the courses at UNCG prompted change in different aspects of my life. In preparing a portfolio for MALS graduation, I have chosen coursework that best reflects these new patterns.

### **PATTERN 1: Seek Human Connection through Authentic Experiences**

**MALS 610: *Global Arts: Windows into the Hearts of Other Cultures*, Summer 2013**

My first course in the MALS program provided me with a new perspective on authenticity, experiences and technology. My final essay for the course examined these themes.

For someone who uses computers and technology for both working full-time and taking classes, it can be challenging to “unplug” at times. However, after taking this class, I have made an intentional effort to experience the beauty of nature or see live performances – and not filter the experience through a screen. I have been personally enriched by taking in moments with my full senses and being engaged and present.

In the unit studying African Dance, I began to explore the ideas of experiencing art. We studied how traditional African dance is a community event that blurs the lines between spectator and participant. I also learned about the power of art to bring people together and experience the same moment. The work of modern performance artists like Yoko Ono and Marina Abramovic supplemented these themes. In my final essay, I wrote, “Participation in art with other people can have powerful effects in restoring relationships and promoting dialogue and understanding emotions. Reproductions of art across time and space would not suffice to create this kind of community.” These ideas were meaningful in explaining the power behind experiencing art and live performances – instead of watching recorded performances on television or online.

I ended my final essay by stating “This exploration of original art and the way it enriches people to bring together communities has renewed my enthusiasm for providing access to the arts to students at my college.” Since this course, I have also been more intentional about giving my students experiences with art. I recently organized a trip to see *Hamlet* at the American Shakespeare Center in Staunton, Virginia, providing an opportunity to see live professional theater.

## **PATTERN 2: Value Time**

### **MALS 620: *The Global Economy*, Winter 2014**

After taking *The Global Economy*, I began to value my time more and be much more intentional about how I spend my time. Through this course, I realized that time – ultimately – is how we participate in the global economy. How we choose to spend our time is meaningful. Modern economics seem to value efficiencies, but an intentional and satisfied life will also examine the activities that are done for meaning and personal satisfaction – no matter the efficiency involved. For example, I am currently making the decision to hand knit a blanket for my niece. It would be more economically efficient for me to earn money at my job, and buy the blanket from a company that mass produces blankets. However, I choose to spend my time in doing an activity with meaning to me and my family.

I also came to the awareness that much household work is left out of the economy. In a Blackboard Discussion post, I wrote, “I think women’s work has largely been left out of the economics discussion. There’s been chatter in the media about working women having a “second shift” when they get home because we often work all day and come home to work all evening (laundry, cooking, cleaning, children, etc.). This is work that is still not part of the economic equation [sic], I think.” This awareness has helped me be more conscious about how time and money work together – and how each family makes decisions about what purchases and services are best for them. I have acquaintances who have decided to not work outside the home because the cost of childcare would be more than they could earn working. Their time home, in this case, was more valuable than their time at an outside job. This course made me more aware that every person and family has different needs and ideas about time and economics – and we all make

different decisions about how we choose to spend our time, or how we choose to spend our money to save time.

I have also been more aware of time at my work, and the value involved in my time. I have been able to see where I was previously doing administrative activities at work that would be better delegated to a student employee. I started to understand that I could let go of some control on these tasks – in exchange for getting time back for activities that had more impact in advancing my department’s goals.

For my life, the course provided me with a pattern to be intentional about time. My time is limited and valuable, and I should be thoughtful about my decisions on how I spend it.

### **PATTERN 3: Improve my Relationship with the Earth by Engaging in Smallness**

#### **MALS 620: *Livable and Sustainable Cities*, Spring 2015**

The book *Cradle to Cradle* by William McDonough and Michael Braungart was the text that primarily influenced my pattern for living in a more environmentally sustainable way. The authors explain that our society must start thinking about ways of creating systems for our waste products that benefit and replenish the environment. The authors argue that many of our current sustainable systems, like energy conservation, are only ways of doing “less bad”.

I discovered there were changes I could start making right away to improve my relationship with the earth. In a weekly writing assignment about the text, I discussed some of the patterns that I could implement on my own. I wrote, “Encourage fresh air. Fresh air helps eliminate the gases and particles off of things. Fresh air in the evening cools without the use of any fossil fuels. Windows should be able to be opened in homes and businesses. From my

personal experience, fresh air just feels good”. Once the weather started getting warmer, I did start opening my home’s windows more!

I also wrote about using the power of sun to heat buildings. After reading this text in the middle of winter, I went through my home and made sure that all my sunny windows were not covered during the daytime. While I can’t quantify the amount of electricity I saved by letting the sun’s heat into my house, I can say that I physically felt the warmth of the sun coming into my kitchen – and it made me happy.

In addition to the patterns I began implementing within my home, I also enjoyed looking at the patterns for a more ecological neighborhood. In my final project for *Livable and Sustainable Cities*, I redesigned a neighborhood in my city of Roanoke, Virginia. (While I don’t live in this neighborhood, it was where my father-in-law grew up as a boy – so it did have significance for my family.) In this project, I emphasized community and backyard agriculture. I was influenced by this project, and I have decided to start at my house by container gardening for herbs and cherry tomatoes.

While some sustainable measures require a system to support it, I also discovered that we have individual power to influence our relationship with the earth.

#### **PATTERN 4: Continually Evaluate and Question**

##### **MALS 630: *Reason to Relativity: Revolutions in Scientific Thought*, Fall 2014**

For my science-based course in the MALS program, I was required to interview a practicing scientist. Although I was nervous about the experience, I was honored to speak to Dr. Warren Bickel, the director of the Addiction Recovery Research Center with the Virginia Tech-

Carilion Research Institute. This interview was one of the most rewarding experiences of the course, as I was able to see how paradigm shifts, a major theme of the course, were used in the working life of a scientist. Dr. Bickel explained how a paradigm shift in his field showed new ways of studying the human brain, and also opened the door for new and more effective treatments. The work of this center showed me that being open to new ways of thinking can have a positive impact on others.

The interview with Dr. Bickel inspired the pattern that I should, like those in the sciences, periodically evaluate and question what I know to ensure that I am basing my ideas on current experiences and information.

In my application essay, I expressed my interest in taking electives in the Peace and Conflict Studies department. I did pursue this, and I am also completing a Post-Baccalaureate Certificate in Peace and Conflict Studies. In my application essay, I expressed that I was hoping to gain skills for dealing with conflict by taking these courses. While I did acquire the skills and knowledge of the field, I also found a deeper understanding of peace and how to live a peaceful life. As a part of my MALS experience, these courses also supplemented my new pattern language.

### **PATTERN 5: Forgiveness and Hope is for Everyone**

#### **PCS 600: *Fundamentals of Conflict Transformation and Peace Studies*, Fall 2013**

In my first course in the Peace and Conflict Studies department, I found a new pattern for a change of heart. In the course, I read *The Iroquois Book of Life: White Roots of Peace* that

gives the story of bringing peace to the Iroquois nations. I wrote a thought paper about this reading, and in this assignment I expressed my feelings by saying, “I found this story to be a beautiful story of peace, restoration and reconciliation.” The story explains that The Peacemaker came to bring peace to the nations, but there was one leader – Tadodaho – who resisted peace. He is described as being an evil wizard who is wild and has snakes in his hair. The Peacemaker was persistent that Tadodaho be led to peace, and he would not give up on him.

In my thought paper, I wrote:

To me, this story was a beautiful example of the power of love, healing, forgiveness and reconciliation. The Peacemaker showed love and care for Tadodaho, even though he didn't have to take the time to heal him. In an imaginary scenario, The Peacemaker could have brought the message to peace to all nations, and then killed Tadodaho – and been seen as a hero to all the people because he freed them from evil. But, that's not the story of the Iroquois – the People of the Longhouse. Their story involves one who was willing to persist to transform evil, despite the challenges.

This story showed me that peace is a process, but that peace is for everyone. A peaceful life is one that acknowledges the hope and potential for every person – and finds a place for forgiveness.

### **PATTERN 6: Relationships Matter**

#### **PCS 606: *Organizational Conflict: Theories and Practices*, Spring 2015**

Throughout my course on Organizational Conflict, the theme of relationships seemed to emerge for me and develop into a new pattern for my life. This theme was throughout the texts, and was reinforced by my experiences with group projects.

This theme was highlighted in my final presentation for the course. I completed a group project on the theme of Environmental Sustainability. My portfolio contains the slides and informal speaking notes that I used for my class presentation. I presented the story of two business leaders in my city –a health care CEO and a coal mining operator - who are forming a relationship to help improve environmental sustainability in coal mining operations. The story explained that while the current partnership may be only a first step, there is hope that the relationship will lead to additional environmentally sustainable measures. The story of partnership was contrasted with traditional environmental activism, and I argued that the partnership was more effective than traditional activism because the person willing to partner is the one who is now sitting across the desk from the decision maker. While I admire traditional activism and believe it has a place in bringing awareness to issues, I believe that engaging in a dialogue that focuses on the problem and issues – without personal attacks – can bring a group closer to achieving its goals.

Relationships are often are a prerequisite for working together and making progress toward goals. Not only do human relationships help us meet our goals, but it restores the humanity within our workplaces and communities.

### **PATTERN 7: Connect with Purpose**

#### ***PCS 626: Conflict Transformation in Higher Education***

In this course, I was able to read the book *The Heart of Higher Education* by Parker Palmer and Arthur Zajonc. This book inspired the pattern to connect with the purpose of my job as Student Activities Coordinator at a community college. The abstract I wrote for a book review paper best sums up the ideas in the book:

Parker Palmer and Arthur Zajonc write a case for integrative education as a way to educate students' mind, heart and spirit. In order to provide this type of education, faculty and staff need to build community and collaboration on campus to support the effort. The authors propose starting with open conversation to create transformation on campus. The authors encourage faculty to help students make connections to their material outside the classroom. For student affairs staff, the case for integrative education emphasizes the importance of reflection and thought in out-of-classroom activities.

Since reading this book last summer, I have been modifying my own work activities to align with the ideas presented by the authors. First, I have been actively seeking partnerships with faculty members to provide out-of-classroom learning experiences for their students. I have been actively seeking to have conversations that build the spirit of collaboration. For example, I recently co-wrote a proposal with faculty from English, biology and human services. We are planning a common book project for our campus. The faculty will teach the same book, *The Unquiet Earth* by Denise Giardina, in each of their courses – and I will contribute by providing field trips and speakers that will supplement the text. These experiences have inspired me to set aside a portion of my department's budget for other collaborative projects and programs.

Also, I have become more intentional about the way I manage the student-workers in my department. At the beginning of this semester, I met with each of them to talk about their specific personal and educational goals. I then tailored their work activities in a way that best met their goals. Not only did I feel like a better manager, but I also felt like I was helping students connect with meaningful experiences in their work.

Through the collaborations and experiences inspired by *The Heart of Higher Education*, my enthusiasm for my work has been renewed. I provide students with important out-of-classroom learning experiences, and I have a stronger passion and purpose for my work.

In my application essay, I stated that my goals for the MALS program were to learn new material and to become a better communicator. I can say, without reservation, that I have met these goals. However, I am grateful that this experience exceeded these goals and has provided me with new patterns – new ways of thinking and living for a more intentional and authentic life.

In *A Pattern Language*, the authors state in the introduction that the patterns presented “can make people feel alive and human” (Alexander, Ishikawa, and Silverstein *xvii*). This simple statement perfectly sums up how I feel after my MALS experience. I am grateful for the opportunity to have experienced this program.

## Works Cited

Alexander, Christopher, Sara Ishikawa, and Murray Silverstein. *A Pattern Language*.

New York: Oxford University Press. 1977. Print.