Metaphors at Work: Identify and Meaning in Professional Life

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CHAPTER ONE

A FRAMEWORK FOR PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Consider the many reasons people work. Topping the list for most is the need to earn an income. With the exception of those who are independently wealthy, work is principally a means to an economic end. Beyond this, though, other reasons abound. These include, but are not limited to, the status afforded by a type of work, the challenge of solving complex problems, the stimulation entailed in leading teams of people, the sheer enjoyment of carrying out certain tasks or functions, and having a structure and rhythm to one's life. Some people even report feeling “called” to do their work, whether it be to the clergy or one of the other helping professions, such as social work.

Yet another commonly reported reason for working is the view that it reflects something of a person’s identity. Far from being a neutral endeavor, many people regard what they do for a living as a statement of who they are in the most fundamental sense. And yet, despite the pervasiveness of this take on work, strikingly little is known about the psychological mechanisms underlying the development of work identity. What kind of thinking processes are at play? What types of context need to be taken into account to understand it? What is the function of work identity?

My purpose in this book is to address these very questions. In other words, I illuminate the thinking patterns, or cognitive processes, that undergird work identity. My particular focus is on people engaged in professional work.
From this point forward, then, I will speak of *professional identity*, as opposed to the more general *work identity*. By way of preview, I show how people draw upon distinct types of metaphors to formulate a sense of professional identity. My analysis is based on data my colleagues and I have collected for a research study on the beliefs and attitudes of people engaged in professional work (for more on the study, see chapter two).

Later in this chapter I will present my model of the thinking behind professional identity. At the very heart of the book I present six in-depth case studies that show how people from my study draw upon and combine various metaphors to form professional identity (chapter three and four).

But my first task is to define what professional identity is. *Identity* is so commonly discussed these days, and yet its precise meaning can be difficult to pin it down. We all seem to know what identity feels like, precisely because to be human is to have identity. But putting words to it can be challenging. Indeed, for centuries philosophers—and more recently social scientists—have debated the very meaning of identity. I hope my own definition adds some clarity to this elusive concept.
Defining Professional Identity

The feature that most distinguishes human beings from other animals is higher-order consciousness. It is this remarkable quality that allows us to step away from attending to moment-to-moment perceptions and think about matters beyond the here and now. This means that, unlike other creatures, we are able to think about past events, future plans, the significance of things experienced, and even the nature of our own thinking. The evolution of language is, in large measure, to thank for this.

Higher-order consciousness also brings with it the unique human capacity to have an identity, or a sense of self. By *identity*, I mean a person’s self-image. Identity addresses those most vexing of human questions: What kind of person am I? What is my purpose? What kind of person have I been? What has been my purpose? What kind of person do I aspire to be in the future? What will my purpose be? In the course of answering such questions, a person develops a distinct self-image.

Identity encompasses broad segments of a person’s life, temporally and spatially speaking. It is not limited to single events or experiences, nor is it tied to single places. Erik Erikson referred to the continuity of identity as the subjective experience of “self-sameness”. By this Erikson meant identity threads itself through the course of one’s life.

Because identity encompasses large swaths of a person’s life, it lends a sense of coherence and, ultimately, meaning to the human experience. And
when life is viewed as meaningful, as opposed to being seen as altogether
devoid of significance, a person is likely to feel motivated to establish and work
toward meeting individual goals. Identity, then, is a psychological construct that
acts as a beacon for giving shape and direction to human thought and action.

I make a distinction between two forms of identity: primary and secondary.
Let’s take secondary identity first. This type has to do with a conscious “trying
on” of, or experimenting with, identity. Adolescents in particular are known for
rapidly inhabiting and then discarding various types of identity in an effort to
clarify values and peer group affiliations. One might, for example, take on the
identity of a rebellious rock musician as opposed to that of a rule-obeying,
studious person.

Primary identity, in contrast, is beyond a person’s immediate conscious
awareness. This is due, in large measure, to the fact that primary identity is an
inherent, biologically-based feature of the human mind. As such, this sort of
identity drives behavior in ways that can be determined only through sustained
introspection or analysis. It can be difficult to see around one’s primary identity,
since it shapes how the world is known and apprehended in the first place. My
focus in this book is on primary identity.

It’s important to stress that identity goes beyond a person’s likes and
dislikes. Identity can subsume a person’s preferences, but these alone don’t
constitute identity. To illustrate what I mean, let’s consider the hypothetical
example of Marla. Marla has an image of herself as a connoisseur of “high
culture”. She reads literature; goes to museum exhibits; attends classical music,
ballet, and opera performances; takes in lectures on various intellectual topics; and so on. In other words, Marla views herself as a denizen of the arts scene and the intellectual community. She might even recoil at the thought of participating in more popular forms of culture, such as going to a football game or watching a sitcom on television. Clearly, Marla’s sense of herself can be considered an identity as such because it encompasses many realms of experience and provides a sense of coherence and meaning to life. It is more than a set of preferences.

People have multiple identities. Alongside her self-image as a denizen of the arts scene and intellectual life, Marla might also have identities as a mother, a daughter, a spouse/significant other, or, most relevant to my discussion, a professional. Professional identity concerns a self-image that specifically answers questions such as: What kind of professional person am I? What is my professional purpose? In line with the more general definition of identity I have outlined, professional identity provides a sense of coherence and meaning within—and oftentimes beyond—a person’s professional life. Furthermore, Erikson’s notion of “self-sameness” is of vital importance. A person’s professional identity is continuous and transcends particular projects, assignments, and work settings.

But how does professional identity develop? Answering this question can occur on more than one level. Throughout this book I will discuss a very specific cognitive process at the heart of professional identity. There are, however, some
essential properties of professional identity that merit introduction in advance of my particular analysis.

Professional identity is comprised of two features, the personal and the social. A person’s self-image is first and foremost driven by individual history. The unique experiences that comprise a person’s life, and even inborn traits bearing on temperament and disposition, play an enormous role in shaping the type of self-image one will develop. This is unavoidable.

But developing a self-image does not occur in a vacuum. In order for a person’s self-image to be apprehended and understood by others it must conform to socially accepted identity types within a sphere of professional work. In other words, a person selects—albeit oftentimes unconsciously—from a repertoire of identity types associated with a type of work. Identity, then, occurs at the intersection of individual history and social/cultural norms. Stephanie, a physician whose case I explore in chapter three, views herself as a healer. While perhaps not the most common identity for a physician, it is one that is nonetheless widely understood and enables her to act on this self-image. If, on the other hand, Stephanie characterized her identity in terms of, say, being a gorilla—to choose an absurd example—this would make no sense to her colleagues or patients and likely be a poor fit for her chosen work.

Above all, then, identity—professional and otherwise—is an adaptive process. We all must be able to translate our distinctly personal histories into recognizable social and cultural forms. Failure do so would result in the inability to successfully adapt to a given professional environment. For better or worse,
we are presented with a range of socially-based identity norms that constrain our options for developing identities. Fortunately, some domains of society, such as professional work, are comprised of a wide range of identity types that are deemed conventional and therefore appropriate.

The final point to consider is that even though professional identity is in large measure a cognitive construct, it is fully realized as such through sustained actions in specific contexts. Seen in this light, then, identity is best understood as a way of being in the world. Psychologist Jerome Bruner offers a useful framework for thinking about constructing identity through action. He argues that human beings create notions of selfhood (identity) in cultural contexts. “These contexts”, he says, “are always contexts of practice: it is always necessary to ask what people are doing or trying to do in that context” (italics original).

Identity, then, emerges at the intersection of the mental (psychology) and the material (specific actions). Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* is especially useful for shedding light on the nature of the relationship between these two ingredients of identity. The essence of Bourdieu’s idea is that the physical world and the way we structure it cannot be understood separately from the mental categories we have for making sense of life. In other words, the physical conditions, routines, and structures of our lives are indispensably linked to how we classify the world around us and the meanings we ascribe to life writ large. The structure of our everyday surroundings and routines reinforces the taken-for-granted ideas we have about what it means to be a person and what courses of action to take. At the same time, though, our ways of thinking about
life continually propel us to refine routines and environments in a manner that creates an ongoing improvement in the fit between the material and the mental. Bourdieu describes this ongoing fit as a “socially constituted system of cognitive and motivating structures”.

Two Forms of Professional Identity

As I have noted, professional identity emerges at the meeting point of individual history, on the one hand, and the conventions of a given domain of work, on the other. But these two variables do not exist in precisely equal measure in shaping any one person’s professional identity. In other words, although both elements need to exist, it is most often the case that one of them will play the stronger role. And so it is among the people who participated in my study.

I refer to cases when the conditions of one’s professional life exert the stronger role as instances of domain-oriented identity. There are two classes of influencing forces particular to domain-oriented identity. First, and as I have already described, each type of professional work is associated with a repertoire of common identity constructions. It is not altogether surprising, then, to find that Richard, a jazz musician featured in chapter three, states his identity to be one of self-expression. The most common refrain among jazz musicians I interviewed was that music is a means of expressing very personal thoughts and feelings. I suspect that the same holds true for other kinds of musicians.
The second type of influencing force specific to domain-oriented identity has to do with the actual ways in which work is accomplished. By this I mean that identity is in no small measure shaped by the established methods, conventions, practices, and ideas germane to carrying out a specific type of work. Returning to the example of Richard, I'll show how the established convention of improvisation in jazz music profoundly shapes the thinking underlying his sense of professional identity.

The other type of professional identity I describe in the book is self-oriented identity. This variation of identity is characterized by a more pronounced role accorded to a person’s unique background, circumstances, and history, rather than—but not exclusive of—domain conventions. A significant number of those interviewed for my research were regular practitioners of various forms of meditation (more on this in chapter two). Following what one might expect, the meditators were more likely to exhibit self-oriented, as opposed to domain-oriented, forms of professional identity. For example, Linda is a freelance writer whose choice of work is shaped in large measure by insights about herself—her values, convictions, and life goals—afforded during periods of meditation.

The Underlying Cognition of Professional Identity

The construction of professional identity—both domain- and self-oriented varieties—is based on a cognitive process that occurs largely beyond a person’s immediate conscious awareness. Cognitive theorist Mark Turner wittily refers to this sort of thought as "backstage cognition" to capture the notion that some of
the workings of the mind occur outside the scope of a person’s ordinary range of attention. The important point to stress about this type of thought is that it is non-rational in nature. Not to be confused with irrationality, which implies a disconnect from reality, non-rationality refers to a way of thinking that can’t be reduced to known, logical propositions that a person consciously applies to a task. Non-rational thought is extremely variable because it is driven by continuously shifting contexts and circumstances, including the vicissitudes of one’s personal history. The ongoing combination of these factors leaves a psychological “imprint” on a person that accounts in large measure for the content and structure of non-rational thought.

Another way to convey the character of non-rational thought is by invoking its very opposite: rational thought. Rational thought is best illustrated with the example of a mathematician using a formula to solve a problem. The formula is known in advance by the mathematician—indeed, it is embraced as a path toward further knowledge and understanding—and is therefore at the very center of his or her conscious awareness while performing calculations. This type of use and application of logical propositions doesn’t occur in non-rational thinking.

If non-rational cognition occurs beyond conscious awareness, how can it be apprehended? My view is that this mode of thought is embedded in psychological forms comprised of symbols that stand for events, experiences, and ideas tied to a person’s idiosyncratic history. These forms include, but are not limited to, metaphors, dreams, and fantasies. Recall that what distinguishes non-rational thought to begin with is the fact that it is driven by the continuously
the shifting contexts and circumstances of a person’s life history. The types of symbolic psychological forms just mentioned are particularly well-suited to serving as repositories of this kind of cognition. Ultimately, then, making sense of non-rational thought—what it means, the underlying logic of it—must occur with reference to the rich details of a one’s individual history.

Metaphors are at the very heart of the cognition underlying professional identity. Suffice it to say for now that metaphors are a short-hand means for a person to reference a wide array of experiences, events, ideas, and emotions. The experiences, events, ideas, and emotions in question can pertain to the past, the present, or the imagined future. So, by using a metaphor—which is typically one word or a short phrase—a person collapses complex matters of existence into a compact and efficient linguistic form. I will delve deeper into the nature of metaphors in short order.

The principle means by which workers construct professional identity entails mentally combining two types of metaphors. Cognitive scientists refer to the process of combining two or more psychological variables as conceptual blending. Workers conceptually blend metaphors that they perceive to share similar qualities or features. I call this type of blending complementary blending.

There is another type of conceptual blending that plays a secondary role in the construction of professional identity. In this type, workers combine themes from their work and personal lives that appear to be contradictory and yet are reconciled when brought together. I call this variation reconciled blending. Whereas in complementary blending metaphors are paired with one another,
metaphors in reconciled blending play the role of helping to overcome contradictions regarding work/life themes. I will have more to say on conceptual blending later. First, however, I turn to a more detailed discussion of metaphor.

Metaphor—Background and Nature of a Cognitive Concept

In 1980 a minor revolution occurred in the cognitive sciences. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson initiated a paradigm shift in how scholars understand the nature of metaphors and human thought. Until then, metaphors had been regarded as a kind of linguistic ornament, rather than a manifestation of underlying cognition. Metaphors were considered either as literary devices—the provenance of poets, fiction writers and rhetoricians—or figurative props for special effect in spoken discourse. Indeed, to this day it is common beyond the walls of academia to hear metaphor referenced as something particular to literary, rather than ordinary, language.

Lakoff and Johnson’s central claim was that “our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature”. But why, one might ask, does the relationship between metaphor and conceptual systems matter? Is this not a mere academic concern? Lakoff and Johnson argue that conceptual systems have everything to do with how we think and act at every moment of everyday. To have a conceptual system is to be human. As they explain:
The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people….If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor.

But our conceptual system is not something we are normally aware of. In most of the little things we do every day, we simply think and act more or less automatically along certain lines. Just what these lines are is by no means obvious. One way to find out is by looking at language. Since communication is based on the same conceptual system that we use in thinking and acting, language is an important source of evidence for what that system is like.

The type of language Lakoff and Johnson advocate examining as a window to our conceptual systems is, of course, metaphor. Let’s look at an example of what they mean. In English, having an argument is metaphorically construed as being in a war-like confrontation. Lakoff and Johnson refer to this as the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor and offer the following list of typical expressions that capture our understanding of war in terms of metaphor:
Your claims are *indefensible*.

He *attacked every weak point* in my argument.

His criticisms were *right on target*.

I *demolished* his argument.

I’ve never *won* an argument with him.

You disagree? Okay, *shoot*!

If you use that *strategy*, he’ll *wipe you out*.

He *shot down* all of my arguments.

Lakoff and Johnson italicize the portions of these common utterances that overlap with war-like imagery. Words and phrases such as *indefensible*, *attack*, *right on target*, and *shoot down* come from the domain of the battlefield. These aggressive and destructive actions don’t literally occur during an argument. After all, an argument is a type of linguistic exchange (albeit sometimes a heated one) between two or more people. Viewed from the outside, this mode of discourse shares key features with other forms of language use, to the extent that speakers address listeners with the intention of making a point understood. Unless an altercation turns into a physical fight—which is something altogether different—one would never expect to see war-like actions as part of arguments.

To demonstrate how the metaphor of war constrains our talk, and thinking, about arguments, Lakoff and Johnson present the challenge of construing such disagreements with alternative metaphors. They encourage imagining
a culture where an argument is viewed as a dance, the participants seen as performers, and the goal is to perform in a balanced and aesthetically pleasing way. In such a culture, people would view arguments differently, experience them differently, carry them out differently, and talk about them differently. But we would probably not view them as arguing at all: they would simply be doing something different. It would seem strange even to call what they were doing “arguing.”

This gets to the heart of what a metaphor is. Metaphors, as Lakoff and Johnson explain, are a vehicle for “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.” So, in the ARGUMENT IS WAR example, we understand and even come to experience arguments in terms of combat. Note that in this metaphorical framework war isn’t literally occurring, yet it is part of our conceptual system nonetheless. The important point here is that metaphors do not necessarily correspond to what is happening in the observable physical world but are every bit as “real” because we take them for granted, act upon them and often can’t conceive of alternative ways of viewing things. Lakoff and Johnson emphasize that metaphorical conceptions are usually beyond our conscious awareness. We tacitly assume that the conceptions common to our culture are “natural” and are therefore the only and obvious choices for making sense of the world. An attempt to persuade someone, especially during an altercation itself, that arguments are in fact a type of dance
would lead to utter confusion and incomprehension on the part of the listener. The concept of argument as dance simply doesn’t exist in our culture.

**Personal History and Metaphor**

Lakoff and Johnson’s scholarship has sparked the emergence of a full-fledged cognitive science sub-field. Research in this tradition has deepened understandings of the many ways culturally shared assumptions—like the notion that arguments are wars—shape how people think, speak and act in terms of metaphor.

But there is a major piece missing from the metaphor puzzle. How does a person’s own unique history figure into the ways metaphors are constructed and used? How do the specific life-historical circumstances shaping a person—in addition to prevailing cultural assumptions—become the basis for making sense of the world through metaphors? How do the events, emotions and memories that make up a human being inform metaphor use? My view is that what is needed is an approach to understanding metaphor that takes into account the unique contours of a person’s life course. Just as culture is a type of background context necessary for understanding metaphor, so is personal history.

To highlight the need for a personal history approach to metaphor and cognition, let’s re-visit two of the examples from Lakoff and Johnson’s analysis of the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor:
• Your claims are indefensible.

• He attacked every weak point in my argument.

When a life history perspective is taken, more questions than answers arise in response to these examples. Who is making these statements? Is it a man or a woman? If it is a woman, say, who is she? What does she value, what matters to her? What is her background? Is she one to have arguments often? Whom is she talking to? What was the argument in question about? What was said immediately prior to and after these utterances? Why did she have an argument? Where did the argument take place—in a library, workplace or private residence? What is her intention in these utterances? Does she relish arguing or dread it? Is she aggressive or avoidant?

Without addressing these sorts of questions it is not possible to understand how the speaker of the ARGUMENT IS WAR examples would assign meaning to them. How a person interprets an event or experience depends on what he or she has experienced prior to it. One mechanism by which people evaluate new experiences in light of old ones is what social scientists call personal narratives. Personal narratives are stories of sorts that people construct—usually unconsciously—for making sense of, and imposing order on, disparate life experiences. All people have running narratives about what their lives have meant so far. But a person doesn’t only construct a narrative for him- or herself. Indeed, personal narratives are a means for conveying to others what makes life meaningful and what one’s life is “about”. Although there are cases
when an outside observer fails to recognize a pattern of thematic unity in a conveyed narrative, what counts for the teller of a narrative is the perception of a life that has unity of meaning and purpose. Psychologist Dan McAdams uses the terms “tale”, “myth”, “narrative” and “story” interchangeably to capture the role that narrative plays in the human quest to lend meaning to life:

We are all tellers of tales. We each seek to provide our scattered and often confusing experiences with a sense of coherence by arranging the episodes of our lives into stories. This is not the stuff of delusion or self-deception. We are not telling ourselves lies. Rather, through our personal myths, each of us discovers what is true and what is meaningful in life. In order to live well, with unity and purpose, we compose a heroic narrative of the self that illustrates essential truths about ourselves.

The people whose cases I present throughout this book devise professional identities as a means of imposing coherence and unity on their work lives. As McAdams suggests, such “acts of meaning” get to the heart of what it means to be human. Without personal narratives at the ready, life would seem a random, chaotic and absurd collection of disparate experiences for us all.

Types of Metaphors Informing Professional Identity

Two types of metaphors are at the heart of the process by which professional identity is constructed. Developmental metaphors emerge from
one’s actual life experiences, most often childhood and young adulthood. Experiences from early life development become the basis for metaphors that are then applied to one’s work. For example, Aaron is a publisher whose childhood and early adulthood are defined by not listening to others (as well as not being listened to) and whose later adulthood, in an interesting turnabout, comes to be defined by listening to others. These experiences of not listening and listening, as I will show in detail in chapter four, are transformed by Aaron into metaphors that ultimately shape the development of his professional identity.

Placement metaphors are concerned with spatially and temporally orienting oneself to work. This can occur in one of two ways. First, a person can have an actual physical routine or set of procedures in place for doing work. Such routines produce the sense that work not only flows from a particular order of doing things, but that carrying out work—in broader terms—occurs from the particular spatial and temporal perspective entailed in a set of regular behaviors in specific contexts. Take away the routine, and the underlying spatial and temporal orientation inherent in it—and, by extension, one’s approach to work—disappears.

The second type of placement metaphor concerns spatial and temporal orientations that are purely conceptual or imagistic, as opposed to being rooted in concrete, observable behaviors. In other words, a person holds in mind an ongoing, guiding conceptualization—or cognitive map—of being oriented to work, and this view has a significant bearing on how professional identity is constructed and put into practice.
Of course the two types of placement metaphors are interrelated. That is why those who have specific routines also have ongoing conceptualizations of how they are spatially and temporally oriented toward their work. The obverse is also true: namely, conceptualizations of orientation to work can be traced to actual behaviors. The reason, however, that I have made the distinction between the two types of placement metaphors is because people tend to emphasize one more than the other. Such differences in emphasis end up having correspondingly different types of influences on the shaping of professional identity.

Placement metaphors are related to the concept of schemas. Philosopher and cognitive scientist Mark Johnson characterizes schemas as follows:

In order for us to have meaningful, connected experiences that we can comprehend and reason about, there must be pattern and order to our actions, perceptions, and conceptions. A schema is a recurrent pattern, shape, and regularity in, or of, these ongoing ordering activities. These patterns emerge as meaningful structures for us chiefly at the level of our bodily movements through space, our manipulation of objects, and our perceptual interactions.

As an example of how placement metaphors are generated, Martin, a biochemist, talks about having a routine in place for the purpose of bringing about unexpected insights for his work. In chapter three I will show how he
regularly browses through library stacks (as opposed to conducting computerized searches) and attends conference sessions he knows little about to gain novel ideas for his research. These routines are transformed into metaphorical representations that Martin refers to as “happy accidents”.

On Conceptual Blending

As I noted earlier, professional identity emerges when a person combines metaphors, or, to be more specific, developmental and placement metaphors. Cognitive scientists refer to the process of combining different cognitive variables as conceptual blending.

Conceptual blending—or what is alternately called conceptual integration—is the brainchild of Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner. It entails combining some elements from at least two cognitive variables, or what are often called frames. When combined, the new frame, or blend, is novel because it has a meaning that is specific to the combined elements.

Turner offers a readily understandable example of conceptual blending. To state “This surgeon is a butcher” entails tying together atypical notions both of what a surgeon and butcher do. But more than this, Turner explains,

The surgeon who is a butcher is a blended notion—neither a prototypical surgeon nor a prototypical butcher. Incompetence is the central feature of the butcher-surgeon even though incompetence belongs to neither the prototypical surgeon nor the prototypical butcher. The meaning
incompetence emerges in the blend: it is not available from either of the influencing spaces, since neither the prototypical surgeon nor the prototypical butcher is at all incompetent.

Developmental and placement metaphors are, in essence, input frames. Elements of each are blended, resulting in a wholly new frame: professional identity. Neither type of metaphor by itself, nor the entire combination of both types, leads to the development of professional identity. As I will show throughout the case studies, people extract elements of developmental and placement metaphors and then blend them to engender a sense of professional identity. Figure 1 represents my model of conceptual blending.
Metaphors at Work

COMPLEMENTARY BLENDING

Developmental + Placement Metaphors

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

RECONCILED BLENDING

Contradictory Life Themes
To provide a better sense of what my model looks like in practice, consider these snapshots of case studies I present in chapters three and four:

- Martin is a biochemist who describes his work routines as a means of bringing about what he calls “happy accidents”. This metaphor, especially when combined with metaphors of adaptability, feeds into Martin’s very ideas about the spirit of scientific discovery that are at the root of his professional identity. Furthermore, the uncertainty inherent in Martin’s happy accident routine is reconciled with degrees of certainty associated with his profession, a process enabled by metaphors.

- Linda is a freelance writer, and she describes feeling compelled to “submit” to new insights she gleans about herself during the course of meditation to chart her career trajectory. Furthermore, she makes sense of a recent career shift by comparing her new work and her old work in terms of contrasting metaphors. Metaphors enable Linda to make sense of who she is, professionally speaking. Linda’s identity, like Martin’s, ultimately rests on reconciling various manifestations of certainty and uncertainty in her work and personal lives.
• Richard, a jazz musician, uses the metaphor of “balance” in both developmental and placement senses to reference his approach to composition, his interactions with his fellow musicians, his general professional development, and reconciling difficult personal experiences. These, in turn, feed into his conception of what it means to be a musician, namely expressing deeply personal matters. Richard reconciles a career marked by a great degree of continuity with metaphors signaling discontinuity.

• Aaron publishes books on Jewish spirituality, a form of work he came to after many years as a management consultant. His career shift—in other words, his new-found professional identity—is linked to a complex, life-long metaphor concerning the extent to which he feels listened to by authority figures and the extent to which he listens to authority figures, including, ultimately God. Aaron also draws upon metaphors related to how conceptualizes himself vis-à-vis Jewish history and culture. Aaron discontinuous career is reconciled against metaphors of stability.

• Stephanie is a physician who has struggled to find a fit between her professional identity and the rapidly shifting conditions of practicing medicine. She references a metaphor stemming from a traumatic childhood experience to capture her sense of alienation and combines
it with metaphors of dislocation. But these metaphors give way to new
metaphors once she changes the conditions of her work. Ultimately,
there is an important reconciliation between Stephanie’s deep personal
convictions and the values of the domain of medicine.

- Bruce is a classic music composer. He is in the process of considering
leaving this line of work to pursue a monastic life in a Buddhist hermitage.
Bruces dissatisfaction with music and his interest in spiritual matters is
explained by alternating metaphors of personal autonomy and external
expectations that have characterized much of his life.

A Conceptual Departure
The work of Turner and Fauconnier has had an obvious impact on my
thinking. Indeed, I am indebted to their scholarship. At the same time, though,
my analysis of professional makes some important conceptual departures from
these scholars’ framework.

Using the “surgeon is a butcher” example as a case in point, most cited
instances of conceptual blending come from the realm of popular cultural
artifacts, such as expressions, idioms, advertisements, or jokes. The question of
how individuals regard or interpret such artifacts is missing. In other words, in
the scholarly tradition I have outlined linguistic artifacts end up being the focus of
inquiry, over and above the human minds who propagate, use, and make sense of them.

Related to this, there has been no research on the how conceptual blending occurs within the context of individual life histories. Just as much of the scholarship on metaphor focuses on widely understood cultural utterances, the scholarship on conceptual blending doesn’t take into account how individuals fashion their own combinations of frames as blueprints for making sense of their lives. By focusing on individual professionals and the metaphors they blend, my analysis addresses this gap.

Finally, there also is a need for research on how conceptual blending becomes a stepping stone for action. As portrayed by Fauconnier, Turner and their colleagues, blending is of the mind, not the world of actions. I fill this gap by emphasizing how the blending of developmental and placement metaphors set the stage for professional behavior in specific contexts.

The Broader Function and Purpose of Metaphor

Why do human beings employ metaphor to begin with? Why does the mind ply in seemingly non-literal waters? Doesn’t the use of metaphor run the risk of obscuring what is really true and verifiable? Such questions certainly are reasonable to ask. It is indeed somewhat of a mystery, at first glance, why, as ostensibly rational beings, we would inhabit the world of the imaginary, the figurative, indeed, even the fantastical. But the mystery begins to fade when we
shift our attention from the distractions of the non-rational content of metaphor to its function in human affairs. Let me explain.

My view is that metaphor can be understood both to enhance communication in various social or cultural contexts and to act as a cognitive tool to help individuals parse reality writ large. I turn to the social/cultural first.

All humans are part of social networks. Psychologically healthy people gravitate towards others for, among other reasons, community, spiritual bonding, companionship, support, protection, camaraderie, romance, fun, competition and mutual affection. People forge relationships at work and beyond in any number of contexts and configurations to meet these goals. Even the self-proclaimed misanthrope must interact with others in order to accomplish the necessities of life: buying food, securing shelter, earning a living.

In a broader sense, all people live in cultures that are essential for survival and optimal development. Each of us, from infancy onward, is presented with a framework of values and traditions about the world. Such ways of knowing and assessing the world are passed down from parents or other older relatives but are in fact widely shared across a culture. Throughout the life-span, cultural values are reinforced by peers, various institutions, and various media. We know about the world through the lenses of our culture and the versions of history it encourages us to accept as “true”. Even in cases when a person disagrees with, or experiences a sense of alienation from, mainstream cultural values, he selects
“alternative” values from a pre-existing range of options in a culture. The person who dresses in black leather, wears body piercings, sports tattoos, and displays neon-dyed hair does so because such a mode of fashion (and its accompanying message of anger and alienation) already existed as an option to be chosen. In many cases, what appears to be a newly invented cultural value or tradition—alternative or mainstream—actually builds directly upon a steady accumulation of developments that preceded it.

At the heart of any social network or culture is the capacity of people to communicate with one another. Communication is essential to ensure shared values, traditions and ideas are transmitted and reinforced within and across generations. While of course not all communication boils down to what is particular to a culture (otherwise communication between people in different regions of the world would be impossible), my argument is that metaphor is culture-specific. Cultures are distinct because people in them share history, values, traditions and ideas. The first function of metaphor, then, is to encapsulate in short-hand form what is common and widely known in a culture. For the sake of efficiency, people gravitate towards ways of speaking that are pithy. And metaphor accomplishes this by referencing a type of background knowledge about the world that is taken for granted because the assumption is that such knowledge is shared to begin with. Literally spelling out what one means is not only more time-consuming, but it often doesn’t capture the rich shared cultural experiences that are embedded in metaphors. The ability to convey meaning is diminished when a cultural framework is not referenced.
To test my assertion about metaphor as a culturally-bound and efficient form of communication, all one has to do is to try to learn to speak another language. Very early into this process one is bound to encounter metaphors that are common in the new culture and yet make no sense to the neophyte language learner. Certainly in my experiences learning Japanese and Spanish there were occasions when I understood the individual words comprising a metaphor phrase and yet I couldn’t comprehend what they meant in combination. It often took a lot of explaining on the part of my conversation partner to help me understand the meaning of the metaphor in question. In most cases, such meanings had distinctly cultural origins.

In the case of Martin, the biochemist (see chapter three), he refers to his capacity to adapt to various types of research institutions in terms of being a chameleon. Martin need not elaborate on why he has chosen such a metaphor. The shared cultural understanding he had with me (I conducted the interview) provided all that was necessary to make sense of the chameleon metaphor. We both were drawing on the common practice of equating ease of adapting to a range of settings with a chameleon’s capacity to change skin color to blend into different environments. But if Martin had compared himself to a starfish, I would have been confused, since it is not common in our culture to reference starfishes in terms of adapting to one’s surroundings. Martin would have had to provide an explanation to me, since I wouldn’t have shared his background assumption that prompted him to liken himself to a starfish. Perhaps there are cultures that use
starfish metaphors to describe adapting to varying contexts, but our is not one of them.

Metaphors are also an effective means of communication within specific cultural contexts because they draw upon both auditory and imagistic modes of processing at once, thereby increasing the likelihood that what a person seeks to convey will be comprehended. All spoken language, including metaphor, requires auditory processing. That is, a person says something and a listener must hear it and then make sense of it.

At the same time, though, metaphors often entail imagery of one type or another. Martin’s chameleon metaphor is a perfect example. One is able to make sense of Martin because of the auditory perception of what he says and the image conjured of a chameleon changing its skin color. Combining auditory and imagistic/visual processes helps ensure comprehension because what is heard is reinforced by what is imagined in one’s mind’s eye, and vice versa. This is not to suggest that literal, non-metaphorical language does not tap into an imagistic mode; quite to the contrary. My point is, though, that metaphor comes loaded, if you will, with explicit images.

So far I have been referring to culture in its very broadest sense. It is important to emphasize, though, that within any large cultural context—the United States, for example—there are numerous and overlapping subcultures. Each subculture has some characteristics of autonomy and separateness that set it off from others. Professional domains are a perfect example. Each domain has its unique history, customary practices, specialized knowledge, ways of
thinking, distinct lexicons and so forth. And yet, the professions exists in, and are
a product of, the culture of the United States in all respects. It’s not possible,
then, to separate completely a subculture, such as professional work, from the
broader cultural context in which it resides.

This suggests, then, that metaphors are used not only to communicate in
broad cultural contexts but also within the specific subcultures of the professions.
Undoubtedly, there are some professionals who employ metaphors that only their
colleagues could understand. But the workers in my research display metaphors
that are comprehensible both through the prisms of their professional domains
and a broader U.S. cultural framework. This is no doubt due, at least to some
extent, to the fact that those interviewed were being questioned by people who
do not work in their domains.

Beyond communication, metaphors also play an important role in how
people apprehend or know the world around them. It is often assumed that
apprehending or knowing the world is a relatively direct, unfiltered process. In
this view, light from the surrounding environment hits the eye and the brain sees
what is there. The eye is construed as a mirror of sorts of unfiltered “reality”.

But contrary to this view, humans have plenty of filters—cultural, personal,
and otherwise—that affect how things are known. What this means is that a
person doesn’t apprehend the world in a direct manner but in terms of what he or
she has known, experienced and understood previously. Old ways of knowing
are built into new ways of knowing. Understanding cannot arise independent of
the filters our previous experiences provide us. Philosopher Nelson Goodman
calls distinct systems of understanding and knowing “worlds”. When he rhetorically asks what worlds are made of, he responds: “Not from nothing, after all, but from other worlds. Worldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is the remaking.”

Metaphor is a perfect example of worldmaking because it entails knowing one thing in terms of another. When Martin compares himself to a chameleon, he is implicitly asking the listener to do two things. First, the listener must draw upon pre-existing cultural and linguistic knowledge of using chameleons as a metaphorical device to reference ease of adaptation. Then the listener must draw a connection between this metaphor and Martin. In other words, Martin is understood vis-à-vis the chameleon metaphor. The same process holds for any other metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson’s very point concerning the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor is that we know and comprehend verbal disagreements in combat-like terms but not, for example, in dance performance-like terms.

It can be puzzling to consider that humans apprehend experience through many types of filters. Indeed, many a philosopher has posited that we possess a direct link to transcendent knowledge. But the evidence for the constructed nature of knowledge and understanding is overwhelming and impossible to ignore. Why must we know something in relation to previous knowledge and experience? It’s not possible to provide a definitive answer to this question because the social sciences, and even cognitive science, can only supply descriptive evidence—but plenty of it—to show that worldmaking, in Goodman’s terms, is part and parcel of what it is to be human. I suspect there are
evolutionary reasons underlying our species’ particular brand of knowledge construction.

My view is that humans have evolved to pay attention first and foremost to the things that are physically and emotionally closest to them. Included in this would be family, home, local territory and the like. Tending principally to one’s proximal environment has distinct advantages. It provides greater assurance that a person’s kin, social networks and property are protected and preserved.

But once local, proximal matters are sufficiently attended to and secured, people are able to consider their relations to the wider world. In other words, when all is well at home and in the immediate environment, it is possible to branch out and create constructive relations with different types of people and belief systems. The crucial point, though, is that because we are “wired” to pay attention to the local first, all that is subsequently encountered in the wider world is automatically—albeit unconsciously—sized up according the standards, beliefs and experiences of proximal environments. People typically know and understand the wider world in terms of their narrower worlds. James Joyce wittily captured this tendency in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, when protagonist Stephen Dedalus writes in a school book:

Stephen Dedalus

Class of Elements

Clongowes Wood College
Humor aside, though, my point is that we, as a species, build new worlds out of old ones because of our inherent—indeed, evolved—disposition to forge understandings about the wider world based first on our experiences in local contexts. Metaphor, among its other functions, is a means for knowing one thing in terms of another. Just as it is a human tendency to make sense of the distant in terms of the proximal, people employ metaphor as a means of apprehending their experiences. Whether of a broad cultural or distinctly personal nature, metaphor helps us compare, indeed size up, new information in light of pre-existing information.

Plan of the Book

Most of the remainder of this book focuses on in-depth and extensive examples from my interviews with professionals, to show how professional identity “looks” in the lives of actual people.

But before I turn to these examples, I will describe, in chapter two, the design of my research study and who participated in it. There are some
important demographic factors, as well as other background considerations, that are important for understanding how my findings were derived. I also devote space to describing some of the key principles of the types of meditation those I interviewed cited practicing.

At the heart of this book, in chapters three and four, I present three case studies of domain- and self-oriented identity, respectively. It is one thing to state that these varieties of professional identity exist. But it is another thing altogether to show how these identities have taken root and developed in the context of actual professionals’ lives. Delving into the rich particulars of peoples’ lives—the advantage, in my view, of case studies—affords the opportunity to examine the consistencies and variations of professional identity across widely differing contexts. In particular I will show how complementary blending informs domain- and self-oriented forms of identity.

In chapter five I turn to the secondary role played by reconciled blending in the development of professional identity. I will draw upon relevant aspects of the case studies presented in chapters three and four to show how workers, with the support of metaphors, draw together seemingly contradictory life/work themes in the service of forging identity.

And finally, in chapter six I broaden my analytic lens by discussing some broader implications of my model. Specifically, I explore the notion that professional identity—at least when it is experienced in a positive fashion—enables workers to adapt to domains of work.
I conclude chapter six by discussing some recommendations for both the individual worker and for people who have the authority to shape domains or professional institutions. If identity has the potential to be adaptive, it is surely in everyone’s interests to create the greatest degree of alignment possible between workers’ identities and their contexts of work.
CHAPTER TWO

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Doing professional work at the dawn of the 21st century is in many respects more challenging than ever before. One reason is that job security is much a thing of the past. Workers can no longer assume that, in exchange for hard work and loyalty alone, they will be repaid by employers in the form of an unwritten contract for long-term employment. The trend in the American business world to create ever larger corporate entities—via mergers, acquisitions, buy-outs and takeovers—has contributed to a pervasive sense of job insecurity. Such corporate enlargements might benefit those in the highest executive echelon but, inevitably, those in middle and lower level managerial positions are the casualties of such structural re-arrangements.

A second way doing professional work has become more challenging has to do with changes that have taken place in the more traditional professions, such as medicine and law. The professions were once considered to be above the fray of free market economics. But in recent years the reign of the bottom line has infiltrating these realms of work to an extent that has threatened underlying—and longstanding—professional missions. Take medicine as an example. Treatment decisions now are dictated by dollars and cents instead of clinical judgment. Managed care companies set the terms of practicing medicine by assigning each type of illness—and its treatment course—a standard amount
of time to be dealt with. Physicians are now accountable to the economic priorities of insurers to an extent that has threatened their ability to provide sufficient, much less optimal, patient care. The systematic stripping away of physicians’ autonomy has led, quite understandably, to a culture of demoralization and inefficacy. But in the end patients suffer the most.

A third factor contributing to the challenge of doing professional work in this day and age has to do with the demands of family life. Juggling child care expenses and logistics for those increasing numbers of families either with a dual-career couple or single parent has, in no small measure, exacted a toll on workers. The need to generate income just to cover child care costs, as well as flexible schedules to accommodate child care hours, has placed previously unimaginable constraints on workers.

One time-tested strategy for responding to the types of challenges I’ve outlined is to work harder. But exerting greater effort and putting in longer hours typically reaches a point of diminishing returns. After all, the challenges in question are largely beyond the immediate control of individual workers. This raises the question, then, about what other strategies or resources a person can bring to bear to stay focused on the work at hand without undue psychological costs. Indeed, this very question was at the heart of the research that informs this book.

My colleagues and I decided to investigate the extent to which—and how—people who are engaged in various forms of professional work might systematically draw upon personal reflection or introspection, on the one hand, or
actual meditation practices, on the other, to influence the course of their work. Reflection or meditation, we reasoned might be a means of maintaining one’s focus on work purpose in the face of the kinds of challenges mentioned above. The research was conducted in two phases. First, we interviewed 70 people from four fields of work: journalism, jazz music, genetics research, and environmental sciences. In this part of the research we posed general, open-ended questions designed to elicit possible forms of introspection or meditation. Only a couple of people indicated involvement in meditation, but most discussed strategies for introspection.

In the second phase of the research we interviewed 46 people we knew in advance to be involved in regular meditation practices. Our goal was to compare the roles of meditation with the types of introspection uncovered in the first part of the study. The 46 people interviewed came from a wider range of types of professional work by sheer necessity. Given that the number of people in the United States who meditate is still relatively low (although continuing to grow), it would have been difficult to find enough people to interview had we limited ourselves to the same four professional areas that were our focus in the first phase of research. Interviewees were drawn from fields such as architecture, computer software design, journalism, clinical psychology, filmmaking and personal coaching/spiritual guidance. The questions in this phase of the research were more focused on meditation per se, since we knew in advance that interviewees were practitioners of meditation.
We focused on two forms of meditation. The first is a Buddhist type called either Vipassana, or insight, meditation. We chose this form because it is one of the more widely practiced types, especially among those in professional classes of work. The second type is actually a collection of various related forms of Jewish meditation. There is no single type of Jewish meditation, although many of those in our study spoke of similar practices. We decided on Jewish meditation because it is steadily gaining in popularity both among the more liberal and conservative branches of Judaism and because we thought it would provide a good comparison with Vipassana meditation. Thirty interviewees were involved in Vipassana, and 16 practiced varieties of Jewish meditation.

As I read through the interview transcripts from both phases of the study, I noticed that the theme of professional identity emerged in a pronounced manner. This was not wholly unexpected. One can imagine that questions about introspection, meditation, and work purpose would be likely to prompt people to mention matters of identity. But what was surprising was both the extent to which it was referenced and the degree to which I could glean the cognitive underpinnings of identity, even though the interview questions were not focused on cognitive mechanisms, much less the role of metaphor in cognition. My original assumption was that I would analyze the varying influences of introspection and meditation on people’s approaches to work, but my “discovery” of—and abiding interest in—professional identity swayed me in the direction that is now represented in this book.
My analysis of the transcripts was highly qualitative in nature. This means that I looked at each interview as a self-contained narrative, with its own underlying logic and personal history conveyed by the interviewee. But in addition to this highly context-sensitive approach I identified common themes and elements across the transcripts. Endeavoring to identity both common cognitive mechanisms and individual-specific properties bearing on professional identity made for a labor- and time-intensive period of analysis.

Once I had determined the workings of my model and the differences between domain- and self-oriented forms of identity, I selected case studies that not only represent my general framework in the most vivid and compelling manner, but that also show important variations of the more general types of professional identity. In other words, just as my method of analysis entailed looking at individual-specific and general properties of identity, I wished to present cases that also revealed these qualities. Finally, I first considered drawing on multiple examples from many interviewees’ lives to illustrate my points, but I then realized that the case study format allowed the reader to gain insight into how the various components of professional identity function together as a whole within the context of a person’s life.

Because of the importance that meditation plays in the development of self-oriented identity (see chapter one), it is necessary to provide some rudimentary information on both Vipassana and Jewish forms of meditation. There is much uncertainty among the non-meditating public about what meditation is, who practices it, and towards what ends it’s applied. For many, the
1960s image of drug-induced hippies in Golden Gate Park, in San Francisco, is the prevailing stereotype of what meditation is all about. Although this certainly is not the social life of the interviewees—after all, they are responsible professionals with familial and other obligations—the 1960s nonetheless has left its imprint on most of them.

Types of Meditation

Vipassana Meditation

The Buddhist form of meditation that was practiced by professionals is called Vipassana, or sometimes Insight, meditation. Vipassana meditation is an Americanized version of meditation practices found in Tibet and Southeast Asia. Vipassana was introduced to the U.S. in the 1970s, largely by Americans who traveled to Asia and became serious practitioners of it. In its original contexts Vipassana meditation is part of a broader and more traditional religious system. But in the West it has been considerably secularized and is often treated as one of many eclectic elements in a person’s life philosophy. Indeed, Buddhist scholar Richard Seager writes that “Insight Meditation is not presented as a religion but as an awareness technique fostering awakening and psychological healing through the use of practices taught by the Buddha”.

The overall objective of Vipassana meditation is to train a person’s attention to the unnoticed processes of the mind and body. Far from being an exercise in self-absorption, the reason for focusing on thought patterns and bodily sensations is to liberate oneself from habitual ways of thinking and acting.
that contribute to perpetual unhappiness, or what is most commonly called suffering. The underlying idea is that people typically focus on precisely those things that bear the illusion of satisfaction but in fact lead to profound dissatisfaction. Examples in our society would include a propensity to think and fantasize about the future or past instead of the riches of the present moment; an assumption that accruing material items will act as a buffer against the chaos that pervades much of life; and an emphasis on the allure of short term gratification over and above more enduring forms of satisfaction.

Vipassana meditation is most often practiced on one’s own at home, with occasional participation in annual (although frequency does vary) retreats at one of several centers scattered across the country. Another, albeit less common, form of group meditation is the weekly Sangha, held in a community center, meditation facility or a person’s home.

Most people I interviewed said they meditate once or twice a day, ranging from 20 to 60 minutes per session. The most common form for practicing Vipassana meditation is the seated position. Typically, one sits on a cushion sold for precisely this purpose, or in a comfortable chair, in a room that is free of distractions. Although there are variations in Vipassana meditation routines—stemming from personal preference and disparate methods of instruction—a person often begins by paying attention as exclusively as possible to breathing. The idea is that by drawing attention to the often overlooked process of drawing in and expelling air a person can be trained over time to become attuned to matters of the present, rather than the future or, for that matter, a past that is no
more. If, as is bound to happen, a person finds his or her mind wandering away from the experience of breathing, it is recommended that he or she simply note this has occurred and resume focusing on respiration. Criticizing oneself for a wandering mind is never warranted.

Some variations of Vipassana stress the importance of paying attention to bodily sensations. In some practices this occurs alongside a focus on breathing, while in others it takes the place of it. A number of the people I interviewed described taking a whole body inventory in a highly concentrated manner. This entails noting the full gamut of previously unobserved sensations, from aches and pains to pleasurable feelings. Like attention to breathing, the purpose of focusing on one's body is to shift the tendency to be caught up in the fleeting ephemera of the day to the actual experience of being a living, breathing organism in the present.

Joseph Goldstein, a leading Insight teacher, captures the essence of basic meditation practice in the following instructions he offers:

It can be helpful in the beginning to focus primarily, although not exclusively, on the breath. Focusing in this way helps stabilize attention, keeping us mindful and alert. Bringing the mind back to a primary object, like the breath, takes a certain quality of effort, and that effort build energy….Coming back to the primary object is mental exercise. We come back to the breath, again and again, and slowly the mind grows stronger and more stable….If at times you feel constriction or strain in your
practice, it helps to settle back and open the field of awareness. Leave
the breath for a while and simply notice, in turn, whatever arises at the six
sense doors (the five physical senses and the mind)....Widening the focus
in this way helps the mind come to balance....

A second, although less frequently practiced, form of Vipassana is walking
meditation. This most often occurs at retreats, and the purpose of it is to train
one's attention to a physical act usually taken for granted. By walking slowly and
deliberately, one pays attention to the sensation of feet touching down upon and
lifting up from the ground, legs contracting and expanding and a body that subtly
shifts posture along the way. In essence, attention is on the present.
An additional meditation practice is called Metta. Metta means "loving-
kindness", and it is the act of mentally wishing good will to all those one knows,
even those who are a source of conflict or tension. Metta is also an exercise in
spreading sentiments of loving-kindness to oneself and to humanity writ large,
other sentient beings and the earth itself.

The broader purpose of Vipassana philosophy is to apply the capacity for
high levels of concentration honed during formal meditation to everyday living.
The emphasis is on living in a what is called a mindful manner. This means that
a person seeks to go through the day with great attention to "living in the
moment", as opposed to getting caught up in thoughts and worries that are likely
to result in suffering. It also entails paying close attention to how one's actions
impact others. Many of the professionals stressed how they strive to treat all
people they come into contact with, whether it be the boss or a sales clerk in a convenience store, with great respect. Vipassana—at least its American incarnation—is, in essence, an existential philosophical approach to living the good life.

If Vipassana is a largely secularized phenomenon, the question arises concerning how people who practice it regard the religions they grew up with. On the whole, those I interviewed described their childhood experiences with religion as unpalatable. Whether Judaism or Christianity (no other religions were mentioned), people characterized their exposure to these traditions as constricting, overbearing, and meaningless. For them, Vipassana has been a means of transcending what they view as the narrow confines of Western religion (and Western social values, for that matter). By practicing Vipassana they have found a way to join a worldwide community of like-minded people who are not bound by local conventions.

The general life pattern of the Vipassana practitioners entails employing meditation as a means for moving from periods of great personal difficulty and frustration to ones of fulfillment and satisfaction. Person after person cited childhood trauma, struggles with substance abuse/serious mental illness, or setbacks in early adulthood that prompted a search for more enduring forms of satisfaction. While in the depths of despair, people learned about Vipassana from friends or course advertisements and sought it out for its promise to deal with suffering. And it has delivered. People spoke in great detail about how meditation has help them pursue life paths filled with greater contentment.
Among the most important changes ushered in by meditation has been finding work that is personally meaningful. For many people this has involved switching careers altogether. For example, one man went from selling shower curtain rings to being a psychotherapist. He had attained all the material markers of success: plenty of money, a big house in an affluent community, a nice car. And yet, he remained deeply unhappy. His disciplined practice of Vipassana led him to realize that being a therapist would offer a deeper type of professional enrichment.

Other people reported continuing in the same line of work they had been doing prior to beginning Vipassana meditation. The difference, they said, was that meditation helped them align their work more closely with their personal values. As an example, a film director discussed how he used to measure his success by the accolades he accrued. But now, aided by the insights he’s gained through meditation, he focuses more carefully on his craft as a story-teller and derives satisfaction from films that have complex characters. He also talked about functioning less as an authoritarian director and more as one who enables comfortable collaborations among his actors.

It will perhaps come as no surprise that the practitioners of Vipassana I interviewed came of age in the 1960s. Indeed, it was during that decade that pursuing alternative ways of living became the goal of many young people. From living on communes to trying psychedelic drugs to listening to ever more experimental forms of rock music to delving into Eastern spirituality, the youth of the ‘60s ushered in a wholly new emphasis on satisfying the self before
conforming to stifling societal conventions. In this respect the habits of the people in my research very much reflect the Zeitgeist of American culture at the most formative stages of their lives.

Vipassana is often the most recent (and sometimes final) stop in a long quest for a philosophical and spiritual blueprint for life. Many people cited getting started with transcendental meditation, following the Beatles’ well-publicized (but ultimately disastrous) trip to India to study with the Maharishi. Some went on to try EST, Tai Chi, yoga or Zen (another Buddhist meditation practice) before finally happening upon Vipassana. People reported that none of these other pursuits has provided the degree of peace, satisfaction and personal transformation afforded by Vipassana.

It is also important to note that Vipassana alone is not responsible for the personal and professional transformations cited by people. Most noted that they have been in psychotherapy as a complementary method for resolving life difficulties. In some cases people commented that without psychotherapy they wouldn’t have been able to obtain the degree of contentment they now experience.

\textit{Jewish Meditation}

On the surface, there is much about Jewish mediation that resembles Vipassana. Indeed, to an outside observer there might not be discernible differences between the two meditation traditions. Meditation can occur in a
seated position or while walking. And while doing so, one focuses on breathing and bodily sensations, with the goal of training oneself to focus on the present. There are even Jewish meditation retreats that are rapidly growing in popularity.

But when one scratches the surface important differences emerge. Most notably, Jewish meditation is largely about Jewish religion, identity and history. In other words, it is explicitly associated with the Western religious tradition that is Judaism. So, for example, even in cases when one is concentrating on breathing, the emphasis is on overtly Jewish content. One woman recounted that she uses breath concentration to think about the Biblical depiction of God blowing air into the nostrils of Adam to bring him to life. Others reported concentrating on Hebrew letters, a tradition adapted from European mystical Judaism. Still other people talked about having Jewish-themed images appear in mind while in the course of meditation.

Another distinguishing feature of Jewish meditation is that it is embedded within a larger Jewish ritual tradition. Alongside meditation people attend temple services regularly and celebrate Jewish holidays with family and friends. For many, traditional prayer—whether done individually or with others in synagogue—is approached with a meditative mindset. Rather than saying prayers in a quick and rote manner, each word is weighed and considered carefully. In some cases, prayers are construed as a spiritual calling out to God.

All in all, Jewish meditation solidifies Jewish identity by forging bonds between oneself and history, on the one hand, and oneself and other Jews living around the world, on the other. Whereas Vipassana meditation is used as a
vehicle to transcend one’s childhood religion, Jewish meditation helps to strengthen connections to it.

People reported two distinct life patterns regarding the role of Judaism in their lives. One group described having felt a strong sense of Jewish religiosity or spirituality beginning in their childhood and continuing into the present day. The other group talked of feeling alienated during their growing up years and leaving formal Jewish practice behind to seek out alternative, non-Jewish spiritual practices, such as transcendental meditation (most of those interviewed, like the Vipassana practitioners, came of age in the ‘60s). Eventually, and for various reasons, those in the latter group have returned to Judaism with much excitement. For both groups Jewish meditation represents what is felt to be an important new direction in Jewish spirituality.

Like the Vipassana group, the Jewish meditators spoke of embarking on meditation as a transforming experience. Overcoming depression, anxiety, doubts about oneself and which direction to take were greatly aided by Jewish meditation practices and simultaneous involvement in temple life. As with the Vipassana meditators, many in the Jewish group also talked about receiving conventional psychotherapeutic treatment to manage life difficulties.

Involvement in Jewish meditation has also helped to clarify professional objectives. In some cases wholesale professional change ensued from insights gleaned in meditation. For example, a man who had had a highly successful management consulting career in Manhattan left the material trappings of success behind to start his own Jewish publishing house in rural Vermont. For
other people dramatic career changes didn’t result from meditation, and yet they reported greater clarification about how best to align their work and personal values.

But where did Jewish meditation come from? Many Jews, myself included, had never heard of Jewish meditation until recently. In fact, references to meditation can be found in texts stretching back at least to the 13th century. These forms of meditation ranged from specialized concentration on the Hebrew letters comprising the word for God to various types of meditative chants. Regardless of form, though, meditation remained a practice of devout communities of practitioners in Europe and what is now Israel.

When large waves of Jewish immigrants started coming to the U.S. in the first half of the 20th century, their greatest wish was to assimilate into mainstream culture. Fearing extreme ostracism, and reeling from the pogroms and other types of persecution that beset them in Europe, these Jews chose to shed aspects of religious observance—such as meditation—that seemed too exotic and would spark disapproving glances by non-Jews. Although Jews during this time maintained a strong sense of identity as such, their ritual practices were by and large “watered down” to more closely resemble those of mainline protestant Christians.

Many Jews who came of age in the 1960s began to find standard forms of religious practice unsatisfying by the late 1980s. The common complaint was that Judaism was devoid of spiritual content. The efforts of previous generations
to ride Judaism of its overtly Eastern, mystical, and exotic features had, for many, left hollow ritual in its place.

But by the mid-1990s things began to change. In 1994 Roger Kamenitz published his book *Jew in the Lotus*, which describes the journey of a group of American Jews (mostly made up of rabbis from various denominations) to the spiritual headquarters of the Dalai Lama, in northern India. Once there, the Jews meet with the Dalai Lama and other leading figures in Tibetan Buddhism for an intriguing series of meetings designed to create mutual understanding. Perhaps the most interesting point to emerge from these meetings is the recognition on both sides of some important—and previously unforeseen—commonalities between the two religious traditions. For many Jewish readers, it was both surprising and inspiring to learn of the mystical dimensions of Judaism—including meditation—that had long been covered over. This suggested that there were distinctly Jewish practices that held precisely the type of spiritual fulfillment many Jews had been seeking and yet couldn’t find in hollow ritual.

Kamenitz’s book ushered in a plethora of new Jewish practices and styles of worship collectively referred as Jewish Renewal. Chief among these practices has been meditation. Meditation can be found in traditional forms of worship, as well as in new centers across the country devoted exclusively to its practice.

Generally speaking, Jewish Renewal is focused on individual spiritual needs. Rather than follow rigid dictates handed down from the previous generation, Jewish Renewal writ large encourages people to create forms of worship and observance that strike at the heart of Jewish spiritual concerns,
even if their precise expression varies considerably from person to person and from community to community.


With an admittedly bare-bones description of meditation behind us, it is now time to look ahead to the actual cognitive underpinnings of professional identity. In chapter three, I examine how metaphors are brought to bear in the development of domain-oriented identity. Through the lens of three case studies I show that certain features of domain-identity are shared and therefore necessary for its construction, while others are specific to the unique life circumstance of the people in question.
CHAPTER THREE
DOMAIN-ORIENTED IDENTITY

Let's turn now to an in-depth look at how professional identity plays out in people's lives. Starting with domain-oriented identity in this chapter (see chapter one for definition), and continuing with self-oriented identity in chapter four, I will present a number of case studies from my research that speak to the various ways professionals develop, deploy, and continuously refine their sense of who they are as working people. But before going through the case studies, it is worthwhile to revisit briefly my model of how professional identity is constructed. Reduced to its essence, the underlying process entails combining two distinct types of metaphor: developmental and placement metaphors. The combination, or conceptual blending, of these types results in a wholly new construct, namely, professional identity.

Developmental metaphors emerge from a person's actual life experiences, most often childhood and young adulthood. Experiences from early life development become the basis for metaphors that are then applied to one's work. Placement metaphors represent routines or other strategies of physically orienting oneself to work. Martin's "happy accidents" routines, referenced in chapter one and the subject of in-depth analysis in this chapter, is a good example of a placement metaphor.
It is important to emphasize that far from being formulaic, the precise outcome of conceptual blending cannot be predicted in advance. Even if two people were to combine the same metaphors, it is almost certain that the result—professional identity—would be different for each person. In my view, the human mind doesn’t function algorithmically, like a computer; there are too many individual-specific, highly variable factors that lead to a seemingly endless variety of human cognitive and behavioral profiles.

Case Studies

Case 1: Martin, Biochemist

Martin is a biochemist at a small university in the Boston area. He was in his mid-fifties at the time of his interview. Martin has a number of professional roles and responsibilities, including co-directing a research lab at his university, teaching and advising students, being the co-founder of a private biotech company, and consulting to a variety of pharmaceutical companies. His primary interest is developing pharmaceuticals that effectively interact with human proteins, especially in the cases of advanced forms of cancer and cystic fibrosis.

Martin’s diverse professional life is undergirded by a multi-part notion of professional identity. One element concerns his fascination with the process of scientific discovery. Here’s how he describes his view of himself as a scientist:

I like to see how a problem evolves, to let it take on a life of its own, to allow things to happen that will impinge upon it that aren’t necessarily
entirely my own design and my own will. I don’t like to micro-manage much of anything, but I especially don’t like to micro-manage my own science.

Related to his self-understanding as one who lets problems evolve on their own is Martin’s view of his work as an embodiment of who he is. For Martin, science is “a form of self-expression. The way an artist paints or the way a writer writes—it’s just the way I need to express myself, is by doing science.”

A final piece of his identity as a scientist has to do with the sheer joy of doing his work. Martin says he has found:

the joy of working with my own hands so pleasurable. And the excitement of scientific discovery, which is like being a detective, only you don’t get beaten up. It’s fabulous: going to the lab every day and there’s the possibility you may discover something that no one in the history of the world has ever seen before. You don’t get that kind of excitement too often in other professions. I find actually doing science relaxing. If I’m sitting down with a journal article and reading, it’s relaxing. I find actually carrying out a little yeast genetics experiment with my own hands relaxing. I find mounting a protein crystal for an X-ray experiment relaxing….I don’t have a hobby per se. I’m a scientist, I love what I do, I don’t need one. My work is my hobby.
To understand the development of Martin’s identity as a scientist it is necessary to examine the types of metaphors that are behind it. I first discuss these metaphors separately—the developmental and placement varieties—and then show how the combination of these two types enables Martin to construct his professional identity.

The developmental metaphor that feeds into Martin’s construction of his identity is his self-image of being a *chameleon*. More precisely, Martin portrays himself as a chameleon to reference his capacity to adapt to various professional settings and roles. But why? Delving into the history of Martin’s professional life points to the underlying reasons.

Typical of most professors’ lives, Martin has worked at a variety of academic institutions. Perhaps contrary to popular notions of how scientific research is carried out, scientists don’t merely choose a topic for its inherent interest and then use the facilities of the institution as a means of carrying out projects. As Martin makes very clear, each institution, and, for that matter, academic department, has different emphases that faculty are expected to adhere to, at least in a general sense. Because Martin has worked in several places, he has learned that a key strategy for success is to adapt his skills to the particular goals of each department in which he conducts research. Hence his self-portrayal as a chameleon. In other words, Martin’s experiences in diverse professional settings has led him, out of necessity, to develop a broad palette of skills and research interests that can be drawn upon and applied to new contexts and situations when appropriate.
As Lakoff, Johnson and their colleagues have shown (see chapter one), metaphor is tied to everyday concepts. Martin demonstrates this when he talks about his career trajectory and his metaphorical self-construal as a chameleon:

Many scientists are chameleons, and to some extent you take on the color of your surroundings. So a little history is needed here. I started my career on the faculty of Wayne State University Medical School in Detroit. And being in a medical school, my research had much of the same character that I’ve just described to you. It involved proteins associated with human disease, and the information was useful largely as a basis for drug development and understanding disease mechanism….

But in 1978, I guess it was, I moved to MIT, to the chemistry department. I was there about 13 years. And during that period of time my work became more chemical and less biological. And that was partly because I was in a chemistry department. Those were the questions that were being asked around me, and those were the sorts of things that came to my attention, and I developed an interest in them. So during that period of time I focused chiefly in how enzymes work, how catalysis takes place, how reactions are made to go faster by biological catalysts: proteins, enzymes.
It was only when I came to [current institution], being here a member of both a biochemistry and a chemistry department, that my work began to shift back towards the original focus of being interested more in proteins involved in disease and disease processes. I haven’t lost the other interests that I developed at MIT, I still pursue them. But the additional shift to a more medically, or shall we say, practically related research focus has been happening gradually over the last 8 or 9 years here at [current institution]. And one reason for it, I suspect, is being largely in a biochemistry department so that is also the interests of many people in my surroundings, and once again one begins to sort of see these things again. You’re reminded of your previous interests and the excitement associated with them and so you begin slowly to add them back to your own research program.

That fact that Martin does work that encompasses two fields—chemistry and biology—certainly presents the possibility that he will work in academic departments that have a greater variation of emphasis than a researcher whose area of inquiry is more narrowly circumscribed. In this respect, then, the chameleon metaphor can be understood not only as a response to where Martin has worked but as a cognitive map of sorts for seeking out various types of departmental or institutional contexts.

The notion of Martin’s metaphor as a blueprint for action gains further credence when we look at other realms of his professional life. As I mentioned,
Martin works in both academia and private industry. While many scientists would find there to be an incompatibility between these two arenas (primarily centered around a profit/non-profit divide), Martin displays a chameleon-like flexibility in his shuttling back and forth between them. But this doesn’t mean that Martin blurs the lines between academics and industry. In fact, Martin vociferously states that the work I do here at [his university] is largely, though not entirely, funded by the federal government. As it comes from public funds, the work here should be public property, and we immediately make it freely and openly available to everybody. Also you must realize that our graduate students and post-docs are largely supported with public funds. Therefore, we do not do, in our academic work, research that directly benefits the [biotech] company. For the most part we keep a wall six feet high and about twenty feet wide between what we do in our university and the work that’s done in the private company. So the private company works on its own projects….But in both those respects—both my consulting occasionally for other companies and the rather close involvement I have with [biotech company]—I have tried to build some bridges between the kind of science, though not the specific projects I work on, but the kind of science I do, and the practical use of that science….. The public puts us in the lab. The public pays for our research. I don’t care if your research is funded by some company. You are where you are because the public gave you the wherewithal to be there. They paid for your training, at some point. And
they did so with the expectation that you would do something useful for
the public. If you then keep your results secret, do not disseminate them
among your colleagues, refuse to publish your coordinates, hide
information, make deliberate mis-statements in the literature, you are
cheating the people who made it possible for you to be where you are.
There is no excuse that..... in late 20th century America some of the best
science is actually done in industry. And the only way often that you can
find out about it is to be associated in some way with a few companies.

While Martin’s notion of a chameleon-like adaptability helps to explain his
ability to straddle the different realms of academia and industry (and respective
notions of public goods and private gains), it is also important to point out that he
sees continuity of purpose between them. In other words, Martin’s adaptability
goes beyond being able to situate himself in diverse environments and extends
to a capacity to identify what is common across contexts. Again, the fact that
Martin has had to step back regularly and assess the continuities between
biology and chemistry, to help ensure an optimal fit in various departments,
provides a means for understanding how his sense of adaptability is created.

Another indication of how Martin’s chameleon metaphor acts as a
blueprint for action—as opposed to a mere response to conditions—is the way
he formulates and adapts to two distinct conceptualizations of being a teacher.
On the one hand, Martin views his teaching as nothing less than developing
students to be the best scientists possible. He does this by helping students reach their fullest potential. As he explains,

Training students to be scientists—there’s nothing more important than that….When you deal with people you have the opportunity to make a difference yourself. I mean, I’ve had students who are so good that the best thing I could do is just get out of their way and not wreck them. But I’ve had other students who I know are better than they would have been [without him as a teacher]….That really makes me feel good.

On the other hand, Martin views teaching as a means of developing a fit between his working conditions and his personality. Martin describes himself as most comfortable when his relationships with others remain somewhat removed. Because teaching—in its ideal sense, and as Martin perceives it—involves a degree of distance from students, it provides a suitable role for Martin. He says:

I’m fundamentally a reserved and somewhat shy individual. One of the useful things about being a teacher is that you can form personal relationships with people, because the students we get are just wonderful people, but there’s enough of a distance in the relationship that it’s comfortable for me. So I think there are a lot things about being a teacher that resonate well with my personality and my needs.
Martin's chameleon metaphor, then, plays out in two key ways in Martin's life. First, as I have shown, the metaphor results from the conditions of his work, namely, having worked in various settings. Second, the essence of the metaphor—the notion of adaptability—is a cognitive map that structures how he manages working in academia and industry and balancing different conceptualizations of teaching.

But what about the role of placement metaphors in Martin's professional life? Thus far I have been describing the various ways that Martin's construal of himself as a chameleon is one that has developed over time and is rooted in distinct circumstances from his life. Added to this, though, is a metaphor that represents a routine in Martin's professional life. This routine, what he terms "happy accidents", shapes how he approaches his work and the meaning he ascribes to it. Martin explains it as follows:

I don't use computerized literature searches very often, except when I must get one particular reference in order to complete writing a paper. I make myself go to the library, take journals off the shelf and flip through them to find the reference that I need. Because I know that frequently in the act of flipping through them I will come across another article on an unrelated subject, an article that I completely ignored five years earlier when I looked at that same issue of that same journal, because my mind wasn't prepared to use the information in it, or I wasn't working on something that was connected with the information in it. And suddenly,
something will happen, a circuit will get completed and information will be clear and an idea will come. I believe that largely, your best ideas come about as the result of something that looks like a happy accident, but which is actually not, because you’ve been preparing yourself for it, and you’re open to receiving information from a variety of sources. And so I try to structure my life and my work in such a way as to maximize the opportunity for those accidents.

When I go to a large scientific meeting, not a small, focused one, but one of the big national meetings, you know, the American Chemical Society, the Biochemical Society, I don’t ever go to talks in my own field of expertise. I’ll get those in the small meetings or I’ll get those from reading the literature. I’ll go to talks that are totally off the wall on subjects that have no relationship whatsoever to anything that I would normally be interested in. I am trying very deliberately, cold-bloodedly, to create as many opportunities for happy accidents as possible. . . . It means that you need to educate yourself as broadly as possible because you want to receive input from subjects that you don’t normally think about. And in order to do that you have to have at least a rudimentary acquaintance with the language of those subjects and the things that they’re interested in. So it means that every once in a while I have to force myself to learn a little immunology, or force myself to learn some plant biology, or something, just so I can be as open as possible to information from all
sources. The failure to do that keeps you locked into a kind of tunnel vision where your own work is what you see and things that are coming in from the side that might be useful remain invisible to you.

Martin makes it clear that his flexibility is the product of very deliberate preparation (such as learning about topics outside his specialty: plant biology, immunology). And such preparation entails situating himself in contexts and routines that position him to approach his work in a generative manner.

Martin’s fluid routines—and his metaphorical construal of them as happy accidents—is a cognitive counterpart to the chameleon metaphor. Indeed, the two metaphors are blended precisely because they complement one another. Martin links and ultimately combines the metaphors because they share a core set of overlapping qualities. On the one hand, carrying out routines geared toward creating happy accidents entails precisely the type of adaptability inherent in Martin’s view of himself as a chameleon. Attending meetings on topics beyond his area of expertise and browsing through journals in the library requires a continuous adaptation of professional goals and interests to new sources of information. The inability to adapt his professional objectives to new information would be a dead-end exercise for Martin. Happy accidents would never arise.

On the other hand, being a chameleon in response to diverse settings involves the same manner of flexibility and open-mindedness needed to seize upon and adapt to new information gleaned in the course of his happy accident routines. In both cases Martin has needed to develop repertoires of skills and
knowledge that can be accessed quickly and on an as-needed basis to further
his professional objectives.

In essence, then, Martin has made sure to create as much congruence as
possible between the broader contours of his professional life (working in a range
of settings) and the smaller scale context of his day to day life (his routines for
doing work). Part of what has enabled Martin to do this is by viewing his career
as an expression of one continuous theme, regardless of setting or context.

It is certainly possible that other scientists, or academics, for that matter,
might construe going from one department or institution to another as an
interruption of professional purpose. For some, this might even be experienced
as jarring. In such cases it is unlikely, then, that a repertoire of professional skills
and knowledge would be developed to the extent that it could readily be drawn
upon to adapt to different environments. Indeed, in this day and age, when
tenured academic jobs are scarcer than ever, thereby requiring people to move
from place to place or even cobble together several part-time positions, it is no
small feat to hold on to a vision of one’s work in terms of an enduring
professional vision.

The question that naturally arises from all this, then, is: How, precisely,
does Martin’s blending of metaphors shape his professional identity? Recall that
Martin’s identity is derived from the joy he associates with the unexpected nature
of scientific experimentation. He noted, as we saw, that he prefers not to micro-
manage his science and to let the discovery process takes its own course. My
view is that the notions of adaptability and flexibility associated with the
chameleon metaphor, as well as the fluid and open nature of Martin’s happy accident routine, speak directly to the very essence of not wishing to micro-manage his work and deriving pleasure from the unexpected. In other words, Martin’s choice of metaphors helps him to deliberately structure his work in such a manner to allow for a process to take root that appears in some respects to be out of his direct control. Equipped with a repertoire of skills an knowledge, Martin avails himself to new forms of information, whether arising from particular work settings or the content he encounters through routines. This approach to work is complex indeed, and metaphors provide Martin with a short-hand conceptual means for referencing the his distinct approach for putting his objectives into practice.

Case 2: Richard, Jazz Musician

Richard, who was in his upper fifties at the time of his interview, is a renowned acoustic (or double) bass player, who has been leading his own ensembles for many years, has recorded extensively, played with other leading instrumentalists, and won numerous awards for his work. He spends at least seven months a year on the road (the U.S. and abroad), and in some years he tour as much as ten months.

Richard’s professional identity concerns understanding his music as a reflection of the essence of his being, especially his personal views about the nature of life. Here’s his lengthy characterization of this identity:
The music has a spirit, you know. You listen to Beethoven it has a spirit….You listen to Mozart it has a spirit. You listen to John Coltrane, and it has Coltrane’s spirit. And that spirit is a result of all of our experiences and our view of life and our view of our position in relationship to the rest of creation.

It’s an illusive thing to say, “Well, I wrote this song because I love trees.” On the other hand, the melody you choose, because you have obviously so much that you can choose from, why do you choose this as a melody? Why does this melody ignite something in you that you want to express, rather than this other melody. And the reason is that it resonates within you in a certain spiritual way. This is how I view it anyway, you recognize it when it happens. It’s almost like you’re waiting, you’re trying to find something you’re gonna recognize as being the melody that is the one that represents your feeling about this piece. That comes from …a piece called “I Let a Song Go Out of My Heart” [an old song by Irving Mills, Henry Nemo, John Redmond, and Duke Ellington]. That to me says it. What is the song that you let go out of your heart, you allow?

Some people write very intricate and mathematical things, and that represents their view of how things are. Others write very whimsical and lyrical things. It’s all different ways of expressing yourself. So, I think all
those things do in the end influence what your choices are when you’re writing a piece of music, or, of course, when you’re playing….

Without a story to tell it’s just notes and rhythms and chords. And what communicates to people when you’re playing is the recognition of the story….And that story comes from your life, from your experiences, from your point of view of life.

This rather elaborate conceptualization of professional identity is, like all the cases in this book, buttressed by metaphor. But there is a notable difference between the metaphors at play in Richard’s case and those we saw at work in the case of Martin. Richard employs a single metaphor theme—striking a balance among opposing forces—but this one theme is used as both a developmental and a placement metaphor. Recall that Martin, in contrast, used two distinct terms (chameleon and happy accidents) to reference corresponding metaphor types. This difference between Martin and Richard, it turns out, is deceiving. As I point out a bit later, Martin and Richard’s choices of metaphor are in fact based on the same underlying reasoning.

Let’s turn now to an exploration of how Richard uses a balance metaphor theme to give shape to his professional identity. He does so by construing balance in terms of two distinct placement metaphors and one developmental metaphor. I start first with Richard’s placement metaphors of balance.
Richard describes performing music as striking a balance—while the music is actually in progress—between his own subjective experiences and his perceptions of the experiences of his band members. In other words, Richard locates himself—conceptually speaking—at the intersection of how he and his colleagues construe the performance at hand. As Richard explains,

I try to basically externalize my attention when I play—I think that’s the best way to put it. Which is to say that I don’t get obsessed with my own performance and what I’m thinking and what I’m doing….You’re sort of, in a sense, in two places at once. There’s the part of you which is internal and playing, and, of course, a subjective quality. But then there’s the objective quality of you being outside of your performance and encompassing and embracing the performance of the whole group. And, even beyond that, embracing the audience and the environment and so on. And being able to place yourself in that space.

What makes Richard’s description a placement metaphor? The answer lies in the language Richard uses. Note that in this relatively short quote he uses several words that have to do with physical space and location: “externalize”, “internal”, “outside”, “place”, “space”, “encompassing”, and “embracing”. As the agent in this example, Richard is “placing” himself at the confluence of multiple perspectives and views. But he isn’t doing so literally because he cannot. Nobody is able to inhabit, as it were, a perspective other than one’s own. Unlike
Martin’s concrete and observable routines, then, Richard’s placement frame is imaginative and intuitive.

Buttressing Richard’s conceptualization of performance as a balancing act is the convention of improvisation. Improvisation is a defining feature of jazz music, and, as Richard himself acknowledges, it exerts an undeniable influence on how he understands the very purpose of performance. He characterizes improvisation as a:

kind of community feeling that happens in the group: the sharing of ideas, the dialogue, and the back-and-forth. And because of the spontaneous aspect that’s involved it has something rather special in the present time about it, which is the grasping of the moment and the reaction that each of us has to that moment in time. So, it’s rather a unique situation….

It is certainly conceivable that a classical musician might talk about the vital interrelationships—or perhaps even necessary balances—among sections of an orchestra. But improvisation, by virtue of being the spontaneous performance of music that is not written in advance, occupies a singular place in the world of Western music. In this respect improvisation forms a conceptual grounding that reinforces Richard’s view that the whole of a performance is made up of the balancing of the improvisational turn-taking of individual musicians.

But more than a conceptual backdrop, improvisation is a routine, a set of actions that enables Richard to put his identity into practice. In this respect, then,
Richard’s placement metaphor concerning balance can be traced to a both a rich conceptualization of his work (as a strictly mental phenomenon) and a set of distinct actions that embody his views.

The second way Richard uses the theme of balance in terms of a placement metaphor has to do with his own professional trajectory. Richard conceptualizes his development as a musician in terms of a physical structure made up of what he describes as plateaus and ladders. When Richard was younger, he used to despair when he felt his playing was stagnating, but, as he explains, one of his teachers provided him with a new way of thinking about matters:

I studied with an Indian flute player in my early twenties, and I turned up one day for my lesson, and I was very discouraged, and I said, “I just can’t seem to play anything that means anything to me anymore.” You know, “I’ve reached one of those plateaus,” where you’re kind of leveling off, and you just seem to be in a repetitive sort of mode. And he said something to me which has always stayed with me. He said, “Look, this is a time to rejoice. All it means is that you’ve reached the end of one ladder, and you’ve found the beginning of the next one.” And that idea of the creative process, it was a great gift he gave me when he told me that, because now when I feel this frustration I start looking around for the bottom of the next ladder. Rather than lamenting the fact that I’ve reached the top of the last one.
Richard’s reference to locating himself vis-à-vis spatial landmarks and features (plateaus, ladders, beginnings, endings) does not correspond to actual behaviors or events. Richard does not literally stand on a plateau and look toward a ladder. And yet, as is the case with the way he describes locating himself in performance, imagining his professional development in physical terms furnishes Richard with a cognitive map for making sense of his art form.

But more than locating himself, Richard’s description of ladders and plateaus is yet another means of evoking balance in his life. The balance in question arises in the imagined overlapping space among plateaus, the top of one ladder, and the bottom of the next one. Rather than viewing these physical-like realms as disjointed and mutually exclusive, Richard now understands that there are aspects of them that, when properly balanced, provide a useful gauge for assessing his growth as a musician.

Now let’s look at how Richard uses the theme of balance as a developmental metaphor. Richard reflects back to his childhood to trace distinctly personal experiences that account for his emphasis on balance in his professional life. As Richard explains, he had a difficult childhood marked by extremes and even "chaos":

I’ve always tried to find a kind of middle ground in life, a sort of balance of things....So I feel like I have a sort of equilibrium in my life. I feel it helps you deal with the extremes that are around you....I had a very peaceful
and stable time until I was ten. My father left us when I was a year old, so I never knew him. I lived with my grandparents, my mom and my uncle for ten years. It was a fairly nice family unit. It was a working class family. There wasn’t very much “cultural” things going on, but there was love and the feeling of family. And my mother remarried, and all chaos broke lose. I think those two things—that stability I had in my early life and the chaos that I had between the years of ten and 15 or 16 when I finally left home—led me to learn to deal with things in a certain way. So, I try to develop a kind of a way of moving through life which doesn’t isolate me from things that are happening, but also allows me to keep a perspective on real things that are important, and I tend to relegate other things to be a little less important.

What is particularly striking about this passage is Richard’s awareness of a link between the patterns of his childhood and his search for balance—a link many people might not be able to make. And while he doesn’t further make the connection between these experiences and his professional life, there is ample evidence to suggest that there is a relationship between the two. The fact that he prefaces talking about his childhood by noting that he’s “always tried to find a kind of middle ground in life” suggests that his childhood experiences are an important ingredient in his quest for balance.

I mentioned earlier that there is an important difference between the cases of Richard and Martin. On the one hand, Martin evokes different terms to
reference developmental and placement metaphors. As we have seen, he does this by depicting himself as a chameleon and by discussing routines designed to bring about happy accidents. On the other hand, Richard, as I have just shown, uses one overarching metaphor theme—balance—that encompasses both developmental and placement metaphors.

My view, however, is that this is just a surface level difference that should not obscure a shared and deeper cognitive process. Recall that for Martin there is great overlap and complementarity between his notions of adaptability to diverse settings and the flexibility at the root of his fluid routines. Being able to adapt readily to different contexts requires the same sort of flexibility and open-mindedness entailed in Martin’s quest to create happy accidents. Likewise, the routines Martin has assembled that give rise to happy accidents depend on his ability to adapt to new forms of information he encounters. The metaphors co-exist precisely because they share a set of core qualities. They are interdependent.

In Richard’s case, it turns out that one metaphor theme—balance—provides the necessary content for both developmental and placement metaphors. The nature of his chosen work (especially the role of improvisation), his idiosyncratic views of his growth as a musician, and the events of his childhood all center around the theme of balance. As such, there is no need for Richard to have separate labels corresponding, respectively, to developmental and placement metaphors.
For both Richard and Martin, then, metaphors are blended—and are \textit{blendable} to begin with—because they share common qualities. Perhaps this is not altogether surprising. The human mind is continually on the lookout, as it were, for linking events and objects that appear consistent with one another. We all rely on the capacity to create a sense of unity and continuity out of our experiences, even when there is a high degree of fragmentation. Without this ability, life would lack the coherence and overarching purpose needed to provide a source of motivation to a person over time. Indeed, this is precisely what professional identity is about.
Case 3: Stephanie, Physician

I include the case of Stephanie, an internist, because her means of constructing professional identity differs in some important respects from what we have seen so far in the cases of Martin and Richard. For a long time Stephanie has felt alienated from her profession, even though she has derived a lot of pleasure from helping patients. She is just beginning to experience a more positive self-image, due in large part to changes in the context of her work.

On paper, Stephanie might appear to be the kind of success story many a physician would aspire to have as their own. By her mid-fifties (her age when interviewed) she had practiced, taught, and conducted research at two prestigious Harvard teaching hospitals in Boston, worked in a private practice run by a Nobel Prize-winning cardiologist, and cultivated a large and loyal coterie of patients willing to follow her to new clinical settings.

In actuality, however, such outward trappings of success have not made for a satisfying professional life. For Stephanie, her identity as what she describes as being a “healer”—one whose commitment to patients comes before all else—has clashed with the economic, structural and cultural values that have pervaded the profession of medicine in recent years. My focus in describing Stephanie’s case will be on examining, first, this misalignment, and second, on recent signs that she now is in the process of creating a degree of alignment in her work.
Stephanie’s identity has endured over the course of the multiple professional contexts of her career, despite her sense of dissatisfaction with her work. Her conceptualization of being a healer stems from her work with individual patients and from her broader convictions that a society should provide for the fundamental health needs of all its citizens, regardless of a person’s status or ability to pay. Here’s how she describes her view of being a healer:

I’m a healer…. It’s just what I do, it’s who I am…. I’ve always perceived that even though I’ve had different work settings, different payment systems, that my work has been my patients…..

Shouldn’t we make a constitutional decision that people have a right to healthcare? And if we don’t feel that that’s true, shouldn’t the American public be allowed to make that decision? Shouldn’t the American public be asked, do you think it is moral that the child of a working class parent has less chance of surviving leukemia than the business executive’s child?

And if you think that that is not immoral, then as a country then we’ll say that it’s not immoral. But if you think it’s immoral, then we can’t have forty-four and half million Americans without health insurance. And we can’t see healthcare as a commodity – we have to see it as an essential right, intrinsic to the pursuit of happiness.
Perhaps at first glance Stephanie’s sentiments are what we might expect to hear from a physician. After all, isn’t patient care what medicine is all about? And wouldn’t physicians want nothing more than to see that everyone in society has proper access to health care? While certainly many physicians wouldn’t quibble with Stephanie’s views, there have been a variety of profound changes to the profession of medicine in recent times that has made it increasingly difficult to put into practice the “healer”-like perspective Stephanie espouses. These changes, whereby managed care has exerted pressure on medicine to operate more in line with a for-profit business model, and has diminished physicians’ sense of autonomy by dictating treatment protocols, is at the very source of the misalignment Stephanie has experienced between her identity and her profession.

Stephanie employs a placement metaphor to represent the misalignments between her identity and her profession. Stephanie describes her difficulties in terms of a lack of “fit” between her identity and the conditions of her profession. She envisions these two realms as if they were disconnected physical entities, with her stranded between. When talking about what she finds offensive about managed care Stephanie says:

So now at this point in my life I’m faced with this incredible dilemma. I’m contracted with insurance companies whose products I think have me in a position that is unequivocally a position of conflict of interest, where
there’s an incentive for me not to do certain things [certain types of
treatment]….The bottom line is that if I don’t fall into line with respect to
certain behaviors I might risk being de-listed [from insurance rolls],
because there’s a termination at will clause that all these companies have
doctors sign. And as a gatekeeper I’m really an insurance agent. I’m
unequivocally an employee of the insurance industry, to control cost.

So now I’m at this crossroads. Do I tell my patients I can’t engage in
these insurance products anymore because they’re unethical?….But if I
tell my patients I’m not going to engage in these insurance products
anymore, I’m truly abandoning them. So now, for the first time—at this
juncture—I don’t know what to do.

Notice how Stephanie uses language that refers to physical spaces and
her inability to inhabit them at ease. For example, she says insurance
companies “have me in a position” of discomfort, talks about what happens if “I
don’t fall into line”, describes herself as a “gatekeeper”; and depicts herself as
being at a “crossroads” and a “juncture”. While Martin and Richard used
placement metaphors to locate themselves vis-à-vis their work, Stephanie uses a
different kind of placement, one that indicates her sense of dislocation.

Clearly, as I already have noted, Stephanie’s misalignment is in large
measure the result of what has happened in her profession. But at the same
time, experiences from Stephanie’s childhood contribute to her sense of
misalignment and, ultimately, inform her metaphors of disjunction. Here’s how she explains the basis for what will become a pervasive developmental metaphor:

as a child I had a tremendous existential worry about death and life, and heaven and hell. I had a lot of existential concerns that were just intrinsic to myself. So I think that that also drew me to medicine, fear of death and confusion about it.

My grandfather died when I was five, and I was exceedingly attached to him. And that didn’t make a whole lot of sense to me, that he could just disappear like that; it was pretty horrifying.

And when I was eight, my cat had half-demolished a bird on the sidewalk in front of our house and the bird was still alive and was clearly not going to make it. It was perfectly obvious it was dying. And I decided it was suffering. So I stepped on it, with my little saddle oxford foot, which I can still see in my mind’s eye, and it went, “peeeep!”

And it was also right around maybe the year after my first [Catholic] communion, and I started confessing. I had just tremendous worries about – I was sure it [stepping on the bird] was the wrong thing to do. I was certain of it. And yet, seeing the bird suffer was also the wrong thing
to do. And so I wasn’t certain what I should have done, but I was certain that having stepped on it was the wrong thing to do….But in any case, my penance was to become a physician.

In this example there are a series of disjunctions Stephanie mentions that provide a cognitive template for interpreting the misalignments in her professional life. She talks about struggling to make sense of life and death and heaven and hell, her uncomprehending the sudden loss of her grandfather, and the confusion about whether it was appropriate to have killed a suffering bird. There is a palpable sense that from a young age Stephanie had difficulty trusting her personal experiences and perceptions, especially when weighed against the doctrines of an established institution—the Catholic Church.

Stephanie employs a specific developmental metaphor rooted in these childhood experiences that makes the connection between her formative years and working life particularly explicit. During her interview, Stephanie repeatedly referred to the dilemma encapsulated in having stepped on the suffering bird to characterize the gap she perceives between her professional identity and her profession as a whole. For example, when talking about what she finds distasteful about managed care, Stephanie says, “Just like stepping on that bird was wrong, I know this [managed care policies] is wrong.” When talking about the option of not accepting patients who have managed care plans, meaning she could be a solo practitioner, “put an x-ray machine in my office…and be rich”, she says it would be “another type of stepping on the bird. I didn’t want to do that.”
And finally, when talking about her commitment to patients, and therefore always attempting to provide them the best care, Stephanie notes, “I take that very seriously—it’s like stepping on the bird.”

Note that Stephanie’s use of the bird metaphor arises from one particular incident in her childhood. The angst woven into the dilemma of whether to put the bird out of its misery has come to stand for the difficulties she encounters in her professional life. In the cases of Martin and Richard, though, developmental metaphors stem from past experiences that went beyond single incidents. Martin’s career path thus far—working in various institutions—is the basis for the chameleon metaphor he develops. Richard references long stretches of his chaotic childhood as the foundation for his search for balance in his adulthood. These differences between Stephanie, on the one hand, and Martin and Richard, on the other, illustrate the point that developmental metaphors can and do emerge from multiple time periods from one’s personal history.

Stephanie combines the bird metaphor (a developmental metaphor) with metaphors of displacement (placement metaphors) because they share similar qualities. Both sets of metaphors reference a sense of alienation, disjunction, and angst. Their combination is a powerful means for Stephanie to represent her overall identity as being misaligned with her profession. Although Martin and Richard also blend metaphors that share qualities, Stephanie’s case is different because she does not perceive her identity to be aligned with her work.

But Stephanie’s story doesn’t end here. After years of being dispirited by the state of affairs in medicine, Stephanie finally has found a form of work that is
more aligned with her identity as a healer. She and several physician colleagues co-founded a non-profit organization dedicated to introducing a ballot initiative on universal health coverage in Massachusetts. She continues to do clinical work part-time.

While in the process of starting this organization Stephanie began using a new set of metaphors to reflect the overlap between her new work and identity. These metaphors concern “having a voice” and being outspoken about her beliefs. For example, when referencing her new work she says:
That’s why I’ve been vocal, that’s why I’ve been out there….I couldn’t just passively sit by and not speak out. And I continue to be one of the few voices that speaks out….I’m not afraid to speak out; I know that this is right.

When contrasted with the metaphors of disjunction and misalignment Stephanie used to describe her overall relation to medicine, her new metaphors of agency and speaking out are quite striking. But where do these metaphors come from? Can changing jobs alone be a catalyst for forming new kinds of metaphors? My answer, at least in the case of Stephanie, is: not entirely. In fact, much of Stephanie’s recent metaphors concerning having a voice and speaking out stem from very personal circumstances. She is a breast cancer survivor.

When Stephanie was in her early forties she was diagnosed with stage two breast cancer. Stephanie knew all too well as a physician that her chances of survival were less than 50 percent. Her illness prompted two sets of reactions in her. On the one hand, Stephanie invoked the familiar bird metaphor to make sense of the trauma she faced. As she explains, she “went through a major existential crisis of astronomic proportions, even worse than when I squashed the bird.”
But on the other hand, Stephanie’s illness led her to reassess her life and her professional mission. She realized more than ever that working for managed care companies was antithetical to her identity. As she says:

When I discovered my breast cancer I thought: “What was I thinking?” “Have I been doing this [working for managed care] for money?”….So from that point on I decided I would only practice medicine that I thought was the right kind of medicine….That I would be true to the practice of the profession. So I took a pay cut when I left the [health] plan. Significant pay cut….I completely lost my ambition. I didn’t care about money, I didn’t care about academic promotion, I didn’t care about moving up socially. I cared about nothing except life.

By having an existential crisis of “astronomic proportions”, Stephanie was faced with nothing less than preserving her life. And as often occurs when one confronts trauma, she re-examined her values, goals and, ultimately, her identity as a physician. Stephanie had always regarded herself as a healer, but her identity as such became overshadowed by a profession newly consumed with efficiency and profit. Considering her own mortality spurred Stephanie not only to create a form of work aligned with her views, but to generate a set of metaphors reflecting an unwillingness to subordinate her convictions to prevailing professional trends.
The creation of new metaphors, as Stephanie has done, must arise out of old ones. Something, in other words, is not made from nothing. In Stephanie’s case metaphors of despair formed the basis for the emergence of metaphors of hope, of having a voice. As Stephanie notes herself, she had two responses to her breast cancer diagnosis. The first was to cast it, as she had done with other difficult life episodes, in terms of the bird metaphor. The second was to experience a form of liberation and to feel emboldened to speak out.

I noted earlier that Stephanie’s new job could not completely account for her new metaphors. But clearly, this also has contributed to the new alignment between identity and work she now experiences. Without a new professional role, it would have been that much harder for Stephanie to generate new metaphors.

A final point about Stephanie’s case. There is a notable absence of metaphor blending associated with her new job. Her developmental metaphors of speaking out and having a voice stand alone. There are no counterpart placement metaphors to be combined with them. Why is this so? My view on this is that in time Stephanie is likely to create placement metaphors that complement her new developmental ones. She hasn’t done so yet because she has been in her new role for a short time. Both Martin and Richard have in the same line of work for over a quarter century, providing ample time to construct metaphors that give rise to their identities. My prediction is that the same will occur in Stephanie’s case, provided she continues to find her new work satisfying.
Review and Reflection

Despite the differences that exist among the cases I have presented in this chapter (type of work, personal histories, goals, and so on), there are important similarities I wish to underscore by way of brief review. First, Martin, Richard, and Linda exhibit domain-oriented forms of identity. The whole of Martin’s identity is shaped by the structure of his profession: the departments he’s worked in, conducting experiments, searching out new forms of knowledge. Indeed, with the exception of his mentioning that he is shy and reserved, Martin reveals little about his personal life; his developmental metaphor (being a chameleon) is tied to his work history.

Richard draws attention to the role of improvisation in shaping his manner of playing music and, ultimately, his identity. And while Richard certainly understands improvisation in light of his personal circumstances, the very fact that he appeals to this defining feature of jazz music speaks to the domain-oriented nature of his identity. Richard’s approach to music cannot be understood without reference to improvisation.

Stephanie is equally influenced by the conditions and structure of her profession, albeit in a negative fashion. She is very explicit about how the economic facets of medicine have had a deleterious effect on her. Stephanie’s identity becomes a source of fulfillment only when she shifts her focus away from medicine as such to the world of political matters.
A second important commonality among the cases I wish to highlight is the underlying process of conceptual blending. In all three cases Martin, Richard, and Stephanie blend developmental and placement metaphors that share similar qualities. We saw that Martin’s chameleon and happy accident metaphors share qualities of flexibility, fluidity, and adaptability. In Richard’s case, the theme of balance spawns developmental and placement metaphors centered around seeking equilibrium, both personally and professionally. And for Stephanie, the metaphors of disjunction and dislocation, on the one hand, and those stemming from her dilemma about the bird, on the other, speak to a profound sense of alienation and loss. Time will tell what types of metaphors Stephanie will develop to accompany her sense of having a voice that she has associated with her newfound work.

This brief review leads to an important observation. In each of the three cases Martin, Richard, and Stephanie link their identities to features of a field of work writ large, just as we would expect to see in domain-oriented identity. And yet, the metaphors they draw upon are rooted in circumscribed, “local” contexts where their work is carried out in actuality. Martin highlights the role of the departments he’s worked in, as well as the routines he has developed for approaching his work. Richard, while discussing the importance of improvisation as an inescapable part of what he does, emphasizes his own particular approach to performing with his ensemble. And, as I noted above, Stephanie is able to develop a more satisfying identity when she shifts attention away from matters
concerning the profession of medicine writ large to a more narrowly targeted realm of work.

What accounts for this pattern? I can only hypothesize about this, but my educated guess is that one is more likely to experience a sense of control and efficacy by focusing on matters in local contexts. And when a person has a greater sense of control over his or her actions that person is more likely to be satisfied or perhaps even have optimal experiences akin to “flow”. After all, it is the rare person who is able to exert significant control over an entire domain of work. A better strategy, as exhibited by Martin, Richard, and Stephanie, is to absorb some of the values transmitted by a field but seek to have maximum impact in one’s daily and therefore local settings.

In the next chapter I turn to case studies of self-oriented identity. A crucial difference will be the role that meditation and spiritual matters play in the formation and use of various developmental and placement metaphors. Nonetheless, the outlines of the underlying cognition of professional identity are the same as we have just seen for domain-oriented identity.
And, indeed, the cumulative effect of the ongoing interaction among Aaron’s personal experiences (childhood, TM, his rabbi, Jewish meditation), his historical positioning, and his metaphorical development from not listening to listening, is a new professional identity centered around publishing and, more specifically, creating an “outreach program”.

As is the case with Linda, Aaron establishes developmental metaphors—the theme of listening/not listening—as a means of referencing life changes. The changes in question, of course, are from an unhappy childhood and a subsequently unfulfilling management consultant career to a new career as publisher and practitioner of Jewish spirituality. This transition is in large measure facilitated by Aaron’s placement metaphor of historical positioning. This metaphor—and its underlying notion of movement—enables him to separate himself from a dark past and forge a present that is more personally and professionally satisfying.

Case 3: Bruce, Composer in Transition

Bruce’s professional identity was in the process of changing when he was interviewed. Bruce, who was in his upper thirties, had gained critical success as a classical music composer, but in recent years he was deriving less satisfaction from his work. The competitiveness had become tiresome and he had come to feel that “I had nothing left to say in music”. Bruce was planning to leave the profession behind to join a Buddhist hermitage in England for a year-long silent
retreat. If his experience in the hermitage fulfills his expectations, he will seek to
become ordained as a monk and live in a monastery, thereby making the focus
of his work teaching classes on meditation to the lay public.

Bruce’s desire to leave music for the monastic life can be traced to a
recurring developmental metaphor theme in his life. This theme is defined by
Bruce’s alternating focus on matters he construes to be external to or outside of
him, on the one hand, and matters he deems to be internal to or within him, on
the other. Most often the very same experiences that trigger an initial external
focus lead Bruce to devote attention to internal matters. The very roots of the
external/internal metaphor theme can be traced to specific childhood events—
events that are the basis for his current plans to quit music.

Let’s start by looking at how the external/internal developmental metaphor
plays out in Bruce’s present-day focus on changing careers. First, he
characterizes music as entailing a focus on external matters. Even though
The primary difference between domain- and self-oriented identity concerns the extent to which features of a person’s work or individual circumstances play the more decisive factor in shaping identity. Indeed, in the previous chapter we saw that Martin, Richard, and Stephanie draw upon conditions inherent to their domains of work to a greater extent than personal matters, thereby giving rise to domain-oriented identity. And in this chapter I’ll show how workers draw upon very personal circumstances to a greater degree to give shape to self-oriented forms of identity.

The differences between domain- and self-oriented identity, it turns out, go deeper than this. In chapter three I made the case that workers with domain-oriented identity choose to blend particular developmental and placement metaphors precisely because of their shared qualities. However, workers who exhibit self-oriented identity employ developmental and placement metaphors in a different manner. As I’ll illustrate below, developmental metaphors are used as a means for referencing desired life changes, from less to more satisfying conditions. Placement metaphors then help enable people conceptual the means for initiating and carrying through changes. Let’s turn to the three case studies of self-oriented identity to see how this pattern plays out.
Case 1: Linda, Journalist

Linda is a 37 year-old journalist who recently left her position as an associate editor at a prominent business magazine to become a freelance writer. Leaving the relative security and prestige of the magazine for the less secure world of freelance writing emanates from the formation of Linda’s professional identity. Linda’s professional identity was once aligned with the ideals of the magazine, but her values, goals, and, ultimately, her understanding of herself as a working person began to shift over time as a result of her increasing involvement in Vipassana meditation and the metaphors spawned by it. She explains her newly developed professional identity as follows:

In the end it [working at the magazine] became untenable and my values were shifting….I wanted to experience other things and create an environment where they could come into being. Part of it was wanting to become a mother. And then also to extend my writing in different ways. I think it’s fair to say that at all major magazines there’s a sort of construct or perspective that you get put into, and your writing is sort of relayed from that. If you read the Wall Street Journal [for example]…they have a perspective to tell, and that’s why you buy it. But that can become a little limiting after a while.
To understand Linda’s identity shift it is necessary to examine four distinct phases of her life: 1) alignment between personal and magazine values; 2) initiation of meditation practice; 3) misalignment between personal and magazine values; and 4) career change.

Linda initially was attracted to the business magazine because it represented a good match for her personality. She recounts having been a driven child and young adult; indeed, her hobbies were playing competitive chess and tennis. The aggressive, go-getter attitude of the magazine provided just the opportunity Linda was seeking for the expression of her achievement-oriented character. As she says:

When I got out of journalism school there weren’t that many women who were [writing for] business journals. I was ambitious and it [the magazine] was one of the better publications to write for, principally because it was so rigorous and it was attacking. It didn’t shy away from saying things directly. I think the rigor of it and the challenge of it were appealing to me.

Linda met with success rapidly, rising from staff writer to the rank of associate editor. But in time, the luster of the magazine’s prestige began to fade in her eyes. Long-standing questions regarding how best to lead a satisfying life began to arise in Linda’s mind with greater urgency. As Linda says, she began to experience a “calling to find something in life that had some meaning beyond
just ambition, or getting beyond the things we all want to get: marriage or a house or all of the benchmarks [of life]."

Linda had her first experience with meditation while taking a yoga class to treat a sports-related injury. Her interest piqued, Linda began to read more, and talk to others, about various types of meditation. She eventually happened upon Vipassana meditation and found that continuous involvement in it lead her to feel “more and more peaceful and open and endowed”. Linda’s developing meditation practice ultimately began to shift her personal values. And this shift laid the groundwork for the misalignment she came to experience between her personal and values and those of the magazine.

It is important to underscore the point that Linda’s newly developed values, and ultimately her new professional identity, occurred gradually. As psychologist Howard Gardner has noted, changing one’s mind is most often a slow process, rather than one that occurs with a flash of insight. Linda offers the following in-depth example to illustrate the evolution of her values and the impact it had on her work at the magazine:

There was a story I was doing on a large distributorship…and they were a multi-billion dollar company that had been run into the ground and was unraveling and threatened to unravel about thirty-five thousand restaurants in the country that they were supplying. And there was a character that ran them that wouldn’t speak to me. And I was dogged in trying to get him to tell his side of the story. I identified where he lived and
called his home in Connecticut, got a woman who I believe was probably his wife on the phone and said, “Look, I’m trying to get hold of Mr. [name],” and she said, “Well are you going to do a bad story?” I said, “Please have him call me.”

So the conflict for me arises personally: how much harm am I doing? Is it part of this guy’s karma to have the story written about him? And all of that became ethically very challenging for me, because of [magazine name], a national magazine. And we were going to write a very opinionated story about how this one man’s hubris brought everything down. After I hung up the phone with her, I said, “I wonder what this guy’s house is like?” So I called the county recorder and said, “Can you tell me something about this property?” “What do you want to know?” “Well, how many bedrooms does it have?” “Nine.” “How many square feet?” “Eighteen thousand.” So immediately after feeling as though I was maybe harming this person, I had another perspective of how many people this person may have harmed, and how rich he had gotten off the backs of many, many smaller businesses, an aspect of his malfeasance in how he had operated the company….

There was a line that the editor had edited in[to] [the story] about how it was his failure. Now, in Buddhism we’re all interconnected. So I debated that point. And he said, “Well, wait a minute. This guy’s the head of the
corporation. His fiduciary duty to his shareholders. He is compensated for that. And at the end of the day he is accountable.” So I said, “Yes, you’re right.” I felt grateful that in my work environment we were able to discuss all those perspectives. I don’t think my boss knew why I was coming at it from that angle. And I think that in the end doing that kind of work kept me in the job longer, because I felt that it was somehow spiritually endowed to hold corporations accountable for things that they weren’t doing in the interest of their consumers and shareholders. So after that conflict, [I] really began to embrace it as an endowed mission, but personally it was always very challenging and very difficult for me.

Clearly, the nature of the project Linda describes triggers much deliberation about how to align Buddhist-influenced values and her work. But Linda’s very capacity to see emerging discrepancies between the magazine’s and her own values, on the one hand, and to take steps to pursue a new form of work, on the other, has its roots in meditation. Put another way, the deliberation Linda recounts is the surface-level manifestation of an underlying cognitive process—brought about through meditation—that had been brewing for quite some time. As I show below, Linda first employs developmental metaphors to help her conceptualize differences between her own values and those underpinning the ethos of the magazine. Second, Linda draws upon placement metaphors that enable her to put her personal values into practice.
Linda uses two sets of developmental metaphors to reference her own values and those of the magazine, respectively. Starting with the magazine, she characterizes it as having an "attack-dog" style. This metaphor, she explains, captures the notion that “the essence of the magazine was to be contrarian. So in sort of a metaphorical sense we were the voice of the person who stood up in the back of the room and said, ‘Hey, wait a minute. That’s not right.’”

Linda invokes two other metaphors to represent her views of the magazine’s values. She explains that “the title and the nameplate of being at a prestigious magazine” [emphasis mine] were particularly alluring. Linda’s use of “title” and “nameplate” is intended to go beyond their literal meanings and refer, instead, to the abstract sense of self-importance and pride associated with working for a prestigious magazine.

When taken together as a set, then, the metaphors Linda associates with the magazine can be represented as follows:

**Magazine**

*Attack Dog*

*Person Standing in Back of Room*

*Title*

*Nameplate*
Linda draws upon a decidedly different cluster of metaphors when describing her own values and her reasons for seeking alternate work. She notes that, through meditation, “there was a greater balance entering my life”. By this Linda means that her single-minded devotion to success was giving way to a broader range of pursuits with different sorts of rewards. Linda attributes this shift to becoming more “open hearted”, or, in other words, listening more attentively to other people and conveying understanding of their views. And finally, she says that moving from the magazine to freelance writing has been akin to “dismantling structures that are supporting you in your life [emphasis mine]”. This set of metaphors can be depicted as follows:

**PERSONAL VALUES/FREELANCE WORK**

*Balance*

*Open-Hearted*

*Dismantling Structures*

Conceptualizing differences between her own and the magazine’s values is only the first step that has enabled Linda to make a career change. Placement metaphors, also arising from her meditation practice, round out the process by symbolically representing leaving the magazine to pursue a freelance writing career. The first of two placement metaphors she uses entails the notion of *compulsory force*. Linda describes feeling compelled by an external force—while
in the act of meditating—to discover what matters most to her and then act upon these convictions. As she explains,

I don’t expect things of my practice [meditation]. It expects things of me, and I submit..... It’s this issue of trust and being willing to be guided by something that’s intuitively known to you....My practice asks things of me and not the other way around. Because when you sit [meditate], you get out of your way, and you’re compelled to make choices by virtue of what awareness you’re given. I became deeply aware that my job [at the magazine] was painful to me....but to have the courage to leave it, that is really what my practice of the awareness of my own suffering led me to do.

The telltale signs of a placement metaphor are abundant in this brief passage. Through the imagery of force and movement—feeling compelled to “submit” and the need to get out of her way—Linda spatially orients herself to a value system that becomes the foundation for her to “have the courage” to leave her job at the magazine.

Linda employs a second placement metaphor to conceptualize moving from the magazine to freelance work. This metaphor entails linking bodily sensations, as well as specific body parts, to her professional development. As an example, Linda says that:
a lot of the intention around my practice is to open my heart….It’s moving your heart in a direction of openness. So you have a lot of physical sensations. I’ve had sits [meditation] where I literally felt my heart is breathing.

Notice that Linda associates the idea of opening her heart with “moving in a direction of openness”. The “openness” in question leads to discovering her deepest convictions about how she wishes to lead her life, including what type of work to pursue. But why the references to her body? The body, in my view, serves as a concrete instantiation of the more abstract realm of values and philosophical outlook. In other words, Linda maps the ethereal onto the material (and therefore more easily apprehensible) physical plane of body parts and sensations.

Another means Linda employs for making the abstract more tangible in bodily terms concerns referencing meditation as a “sit”. “Sit”, in its ordinary usage, is a verb. As such, it conveys action and physicality. But meditation, with its explicit focus on developing attention and awareness, is an abstract endeavor. One hardly equates meditating with physical activity, unless, of course, it is the walking variety. Linda, however, takes meditation out of the realm of the abstract and places it, instead, in the realm of the physical, especially the body. How does she do this? Linda uses “sit” as a noun to stand for meditation, and yet, because of its more common verb form, it retains associations of action and
physicality. Meditation, then, as portrayed by Linda, is as much of the body as it is of the mind.

Let’s briefly review the main contours of Linda’s case, with the goal of highlighting the how her developmental and placement metaphors blend together. Linda first conceptualizes desired life changes in terms of two contrasting sets of metaphors, one referencing the values of the business magazine, the other her Buddhist-influenced values that are the foundation for her freelance career. Her placement metaphors—notions of compulsory force, her body to as an instantiation of abstract concepts, and infusing the ethereal nature of meditation with physicality—all serve to help Linda conceptualize moving from the world of the magazine to her new line of work. This explains why it is no coincidence that Linda’s placement metaphors entail notions of movement. Compulsory forces lead her to identity her inner-most convictions; her “breathing heart”, and its associated expansions and contractions, spurs to explore her desires; and calling meditation a “sit” brings a degree of movement to an otherwise minimally physical activity.

Case 2: Aaron, Book Publisher

Aaron is the head of a book publishing company devoted to Jewish spiritual matters. He started the company with his wife after leaving a successful career as a management consultant. Aaron’s interest in becoming a publisher
has flowed from his experiences with Jewish meditation and a general deepening of his spiritual understanding. He was 61 years old when interviewed.

Aaron’s professional identity as a publisher is, in his words, as one who heads an “outreach program” to “communicate to other people what we [he and his wife] learned” in the course of the development of their own renewed Jewish spirituality. Whereas in Linda’s case her identity is attributable, in part, to the substitution of one developmental metaphor cluster for another, Aaron’s professional identity centers around the affirmative and negative poles of a single developmental metaphor theme: listening. More specifically, Aaron regards his childhood through early adulthood as a period of not listening, both as one who did not listen to others and as one who was not listened to. Marking an important change in his life, though, Aaron construes his middle adulthood and beyond as defined by the very opposite: listening. To understand this pattern, as well as the placement metaphors Aaron uses, let’s turn to his life story as a starting point.

As I have mentioned, Aaron’s childhood through early adulthood is defined by a sense of not being listened to. Although much of Aaron’s experience of being unheard has to do with the actions of specific people, he does cite a general feeling, emerging in his earliest years, of alienation from the type of Orthodox Judaism that dominated his home. As I’ll show, this sense of estrangement from the religion of his parents plays an important role in Aaron’s development. He characterizes this variation of Orthodox Judaism as dominated by strong expectations for outward ritual behavior, but at the expense of internal spiritual fulfillment. As Aaron explains,
I grew up in what I describe as a peasant, Orthodox family in the Bronx. My father was not an educated man. He was born in 1900, came here in 1902, [was from] a poor immigrant family, and went to work when he was seven years old. So he graduated from the third grade and he knew everything he was supposed to do [religiously] but had absolutely no idea why he was doing it, which I think is the case with most people of his cultural background…. [such orthodoxy was] without anything interior other than a very strong identity as Jew.

This brand of Judaism felt hollow to Aaron, as he longed for a religious tradition that spoke to his inner spiritual life. His sense of alienation from Judaism was reinforced when he began attending private Jewish school (called Yeshiva). But more than a general sense of estrangement, Aaron cites actual people and events that deepened his sense of not being heard. In a particularly brutal account, Aaron describes being disregarded—and, indeed, abused—by the principal of his Yeshiva:

I mean you got smacked around all the time…. And there were a lot of times you got smacked around [for not doing] anything. And there were other times you got smacked around because you did do something…. And so if you got hit and you did something, you didn’t complain about it. But one time, I really didn’t do anything and I got
slammed. And I stormed out of the classroom, and I demanded to see the principal, and I was showed into his office. And I’ll never forget it. How old could I have been? 10, 11-years-old. I was sitting on the other side of his desk and told him with righteous indignation what had happened. And he very kindly came around his desk and smashed me across the face. And said to me, “Did he hit you that hard?” And I said, “No.” And he said, “Then you have nothing to complain about. Go back to your classroom.”

Quite obviously, Aaron’s example reveals a serious degree of not being listened to. First his teacher didn’t listen to Aaron’s claim that he didn’t do anything wrong. And then, even more dramatically, the Yeshiva principle didn’t listen to Aaron’s story about the teacher.

The theme of not being listened to came to a climax when Aaron was 19 years old. The event he describes had life-changing consequences for him:

And when I was 19, I had a disagreement with my father and left his home. I was a senior in college then, and my uncles prevailed upon me to go see [the family rabbi] with my father to try and settle the dispute. And we didn’t. [The rabbi] sat there and said to my father, “What happened?” And my father told his version of events, and [the rabbi] turned to me and said, “Do what you father tells you to do.” And I said, “I think we left out a step here. Weren’t you supposed to first ask me what my version was?” And he said, “No, do what you father tells you to do.” And I said, “That’s
not going to happen.” And got up to leave and he turned to my father and essentially said, “Say Kaddish [Jewish prayer for the dead] for him.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, this episode and other experiences of not being listened to led Aaron to turn away from people and develop, instead, a high degree of self-reliance. Aaron characterizes his sense of self-reliance as being comprised both of confidence in his ability to make his own way and being averse to taking direction from others. He says:

One of the hallmarks of my existence, having walked out my father’s house at age 19 and never gone back, is I do what I do. Nobody tells me what to do. But even in my career, the hallmark of my career as a young professional was that when my bosses would tell me to do something that I disagreed with I would tell them, “No. I don’t agree with you. Here’s why.”

Aaron makes an explicit link here between the dispute with his father and the broader metaphor theme of not listening that shaped the earlier part of his life. His experiences of not being listened to results in an aversion to listening to others (“nobody tells me what to do”).

The question becomes, then, how a deeply entrenched pattern of not listening eventually is transformed into its polar opposite, listening. This turnaround is particularly striking because Aaron begins to listen to voices of
religious authority. The circumstances of his childhood—feeling alienated from Judaism writ large and being abused at the hands of Yeshiva officials—certainly didn’t establish the kinds of conditions one usually assumes would lead to a life of spiritual listening, and, ultimately, a career devoted to publishing books on Jewish spirituality. Clearly, something needs to have mediated between the events of Aaron’s past and his more recent development.

Four interrelated factors account for Aaron’s metaphor transformation. First, Aaron employs a type of placement metaphor—what I call historical positioning—that is particular to the Jewish meditators in the study. The second factor is Aaron’s involvement in Transcendental Meditation. Third is the influence of a rabbi. And the fourth factor is Aaron’s practice of Jewish meditation. Let’s look at how each of these four factors influence Aaron’s capacity to listen, following a life defined by not listening.

Historical positioning is a placement metaphor that provides Aaron with a means for psychologically locating himself at the intersection of Jewish history and tradition, on the one hand, and a rapidly changing landscape of contemporary Jewish spirituality, on the other. As one would expect, Aaron cannot accept, in unmitigated form, the style of Judaism he knew growing up. He found it alienating then, and would be unlikely to find it satisfying or meaningful now. As I have shown, much of Aaron’s pattern of not listening was shaped, in large measure, by his negative experiences with Judaism during his childhood. And yet to continue to identity himself as Jewish—particularly in the active sense that he does—Aaron had to carry forward with him some element of being
Jewish that would provide a basis for constructing a new type of Jewish spiritual life. Aaron accomplishes this by separating the tenets of Jewish religiosity per se from being a Jewish person representing cultural continuity. Cultural continuity can refer to many things, including broad Jewish values of learning and inquiry (as opposed to more narrow, prescribed religious dictates), food (especially associated with various holidays), solidarity with fellow Jews as minorities in an overwhelmingly Christian society (most dramatically symbolized by U.S. presidents who are seen praying at public events), and a sense of the survival of Jewish traditions through centuries of persecution.

Aaron acknowledges that having a sense of cultural continuity is somewhat surprising, given his negative reactions to Judaism as a child. But he notes, though, that “for whatever reason, my Jewish identity has always been the core of my being.” By having a Jewish identity that enables Aaron to emphasize culture over religiosity, Aaron positions himself to maintain a sense of connection to the Judaism of the past while having a foundation of sorts for creating a new kind of Jewish practice in the present. Notice that I characterize the elements Aaron carries forward from Judaism to be of the past, not of his past. This is because Aaron emphasizes a Jewishness he associates with a general, and perhaps even generic, historical tradition. He doesn’t draw upon the type of Judaism practiced in his home or Yeshiva because these forms are too repugnant to him. The new Jewish spirituality he forges in his adulthood is, of necessity, built up out of a general cultural tradition not tainted by painful memories.
But how does historical positioning affect Aaron’s capacity to listen? My view is that preserving his Jewish identity, despite very negative experiences, is a means of “listening”—in a metaphorical sense—to the past. By paying heed to aspects of tradition, Aaron avails himself to something larger, and in a sense more authoritative—than he is: history and culture.

The second factor impacting the development of Aaron’s capacity to listen is Transcendental Meditation (TM). In the 1970s Aaron, along with many others of his age, sought out TM as a means of reducing stress and finding peace. His primary focus for many years had been on climbing the status ladder at his consulting firm (he noted that he became the youngest partner in the firm’s history), and this left him exhausted and, ultimately, unsatisfied. While, as I have noted, Aaron had a strong sense of Jewish identity, he had not yet found a means of forging a new kind of Jewish spiritual practice.

For my purposes, Aaron’s involvement in TM is most notable because of its impact on developing his capacity to listen to others. As Aaron explains, TM helped him learn how to 1) listen to (and take direction from) a rabbi who would become very influential in shaping his new Jewish spirituality and 2) listen to God. Here’s he describes TM’s role in learning to listen:

I think that [TM] played a major role in opening me up to the possibilities that [rabbi’s name] presented, and to opening me up to the spiritual possibilities of Judaism. All I had known was the ritual possibilities of Judaism: some ethical or moral precepts…but I didn’t know what Judaism
was saying about my life…. [what] it opened me up to was a greater focus on the possibility that there was something beyond myself. And if there was something beyond myself — as a believer I always knew what that was — but what was the connection? [Previously], it was just childlike selfishness. “Hey, God I’m really having a bad time. Do what you can to help me out.” But rather say what is the broader implication of that in my life? What should I do differently? Being enough at peace that you could not just have a monologue with God, but a dialogue.

What’s the dialogue?….What I’m talking about is if you shut up, what do you hear? What do you hear? For me, meditation was a way to listen. And once you start listening, it’s very dangerous (laughs). God knows what you’re going to hear. You might hear somebody say, “I think you ought to do this thing you don’t want to do, even though you don’t want to do it.” And to accept that there are things you just don’t understand. There’s a whole body of information and experience beyond you that is yet relevant to your life.

Although TM introduced Aaron to the notion of listening, the primary challenge he faced once he met the rabbi mentioned above (whose temple he subsequently joined) was overcoming the negative associations engendered in childhood regarding rabbis and authority figures writ large. TM provided an
abstract framework for listening, but it was Aaron’s interactions with the rabbi that ultimately helped him to more fully develop this capacity. He explains:

[The rabbi] said she [Aaron’s non-Jewish wife] would be going to an introduction to Judaism class…. And I said, “That’s nice.” And he said, “You’re going too.” And I laughed and said, “You’re kidding, of course? Why would I go? I know all this stuff already.” And he said, “You don’t know as much as you think you know. And if you can’t learn anything then you’ll help teach. But you’re going.” It was a very interesting moment, because I consciously sat there and said “there aren’t a lot of people who have the right to tell me what to do.” And I said, “This guy is telling me what to do?” It was a very interesting moment. And I consciously said, “you know what, I think I’m at a point where I can accept that he has an authority in a particular part of my life and that I will do what he tells me to do, even though I don’t see why I should do it and don’t really want to do it.”

And it came up again several months later after [his wife] decided that she wanted us to get married again in the synagogue. And [the rabbi] said to me, “I want you to obtain a Get,” [which is] a religious divorce from my first wife. This is a Reform rabbi. And again I said, “You’re kidding? What are you talking about? I haven’t talked to her for years. She won’t show up.” And he said, “Well, there’s a point of Jewish law that if you do something
that is beneficial to someone, and giving a woman a *Get* according to Jewish law is a good thing for them, you can do that without their consent and the document is held until they get around to picking it up….You’re already separated. Now you’re just giving her her freedom to remarry”….And I said, “I don’t need this.” And he said, “Yes, but your wife does. Your second wife needs for you to do this. And I want you to do it.” So again, the matter of does somebody have some authority in part of your life. Can you accept that? That you will do something because somebody tells you it’s a right thing to do whether or not you completely agree.

The final factor influencing Aaron’s capacity to listen is his involvement in Jewish meditation. Aaron explains:

My practice of Jewish meditation is an adaptation of what I was doing before [in TM]….The focus [on] perfecting myself [through] self-reflection and self-examination….I think the Jewish part of it is that my focus comes from my tradition, from Judaism. Something will strike me in the Torah portion or in the prayer book, and so it becomes a reflective, corrective, centering experience, as well as an analytical experience….In the end, I’ve gone from trying to get out to looking back in. And so the tool is Judaism or Jewish concepts of right behavior.
The striking feature of this passage is that Aaron recognizes the authority of Jewish tradition in a manner that would have been inconceivable in earlier periods of his life. Whereas before Judaism represented hollow ritual, it now provides a vehicle for reflection, “looking back in”, and “centering”. And by ceding to the authority of Judaism through meditation and his participation in temple life, Aaron has, in a metaphorical sense, engaged in yet another form of listening.

Using Jewish meditation as a means of expanding the role of listening in Aaron’s life is made possible in large measure, as I have noted, by positioning himself at the intersection of the Jewish past and the Jewish present. But Aaron’s very notion of having a dialog with God, as well as listening to Jewish tradition in a new context, is a way for Aaron to build bridges from the present to the future. Again, as Aaron comments, “Something will strike me in the Torah portion or in the prayer book, and so it becomes a reflective, corrective, centering experience, as well as an analytical experience.” Embedded in Aaron’s statement is the notion of listening to tradition and himself in a new way so as to create a blueprint for future action. Composing, by its very nature, is a solitary endeavor, its ultimate aim is external in orientation. Composers hope the musical scores they produce will one day be performed for audiences. Further, in this day and age it is the rare composer who can write a piece of music that gets the type of recognition that has come Bruce’s way and still remain isolated. If anything, a composer’s career depends on granting interviews, making public appearances, teaching master classes, and various other activities associated
with outwardness. Composers who shun public contact are typically those who already have achieved a significant degree of acclaim and can thus afford to reject the obligations normally entailed in such an art form.

Meditation, in contrast, involves focusing on internal matters. Far from being a public display, meditation is private practice only truly knowable to the person engaged in it. Here’s how Bruce describes the differences between the external focus of music and the internal focus of meditation:

When you're creating a piece, it’s very easy to get involved in that piece, and just my whole mind is in the world of the piece and in the process of creating it. Like I’m concerned with my deadline, concerned with finishing the piece, concerned with what will happen next in the piece. When I’m not writing, that can all just kind of fade away. And I did a meditation retreat this summer, and it was interesting because my mind got really still and all that kind of desire for that just kind of was not there. So it is kind of dependent on the stimulus of the page being in front of you.

Composing entails an ongoing emphasis on tending to the “stimulus of the page being in front of you” and various external obligations such as day to day concerns about “what will happen next in the piece” and finishing it on deadline. The world of meditation, on the other hand, has to do with inwardness and, more specifically, the stillness of his mind. And when his mind is in a still state his
desire for being focused on the external obligations of music is “not there”.
Ultimately, then, attention to internal matters proves more satisfying.

Meditation, as I’ve noted, concerns internal attention. But even within the
this realm Bruce distinguishes between forms of attention that are more internally
focused than others. He begins each meditation session with a more externally
focused practice called Metta (see chapter two for a definition), and this, in turn,
leads to forms of practice that entail more internal attention. Bruce characterizes
Metta as having “the intention to generate feelings of loving and kindness
towards self and others; in fact, towards everyone and everything in the
universe”. By conveying such sentiments toward people, beings and spaces far
removed from himself, Bruce is leading off his meditation with a focus on matters
that are by and large external.

Immediately following the practice of Metta, though, Bruce turns his
attention to more exclusively internal matters. The focus becomes an acute
awareness of fleeting experiences and sensations. Bruce calls this an
“absorption practice” and describes it as “altered states of
consciousness…characterized by a lot of physical bliss or rapture….The whole
body feels pervaded by this kind of rapture…[which] turns to happiness”. The
culmination of this practice is “just being open to whatever is going on in that
choiceless awareness way….you can really see when you’re clinging and when
you’re not clinging”.

How can we account for the fact Bruce’s meditation practice entails the
same type of progression from an external to internal focus that underlies his
career shift (music to monastery)? My view is that the shift from Metta to absorption practice seen in Bruce’s meditation is not merely coincident with his broader career change. Instead, the progression from external to internal attention afforded by meditation provides Bruce with an experiential template, as it were, that guides his actions—namely, his approach to his career. This view gains credence when we consider two factors. First, Bruce had been meditating for many years prior to arriving at his decision to leave music. This means that meditation—and the experience of increased internal attention—has had plenty of opportunity to shape Bruce’s approach to any number of areas of his life. But in addition to being chronologically antecedent to his career change, meditation entails a powerful emotional and spiritual salience that infuses Bruce’s life in many ways, his career being just one example.

But the seeds of Bruce’s recurring external/internal metaphor theme aren’t limited to his meditation practice. Two distinct sets of childhood experiences also have shaped the theme, in which an initial focus on external matters gives way to attention on the realm of the internal. The first set of experiences concerns the development of his career as a musician. When Bruce was six years old he was forced to take piano lessons, something he was “completely and utterly not interested” in. In fact, he went through it “kicking and screaming” for an entire year. Then, at the age of eleven his parents “made” him take violin lessons. As he says, “I hated that even more”.

In an important turnaround, however, Bruce became passionate about music when he was about to turn 17. As he explains:
I very suddenly saw a guy play classical guitar on TV, a very famous guitar concerto. And I just knew that I wanted to do that. And so I started taking lessons and I took to it very quickly. I very soon decided I wanted to be a musician, but [my family] was very academically streamlined….so the whole idea to be a musician was just ridiculous, and it was kind of dismissed.

Bruce’s experience of first detesting the music lessons foisted upon him by his parents and then coming to love music on his own terms has all the elements of the metaphor pattern that currently defines his life. His initial exposure to music was not of his own choosing—it was imposed, externally, by his parents. But developing a passion for music came about because of a more internal focus. Bruce responded to the visceral experience of being moved as he watched a guitar performance. Of course one could argue that without forced music lessons Bruce might not have had an adequate appreciation for what he saw on television. This might be true. But my point is that Bruce’s deployment of attention while taking lessons and watching the performance is of a qualitatively different nature. The former is an external orientation (parental expectations), while the latter is an internal orientation (personal desire, visceral experience).
Interestingly, despite Bruce's parents' expectations that he take lessons as a young child, his decision to pursue music as a career proved distasteful to them.

The ongoing struggle between external (parental) demands and internal preferences also manifests itself in Bruce's spiritual development, ultimately leading to his involvement in meditation. Bruce grew up in an Orthodox Jewish family in England. He describes his father as "authoritarian" regarding Jewish laws: "There was no stepping outside the rules laid down. It was very strict and almost tyrannically enforced by my father." Bruce's response these external demands was to stop "practicing any Judaism behind my father's back, shortly after my bar mitzvah, when I was 13 or 14....[I] would go through the motions....because he had a fearsome temper".

Bruce began to spend time in nature, and it was during this period when "spiritual things started to come" to him. And once he went off to college he became introduced to Vipassana meditation. Bruce notes that meditation was "presented to him in a very open way, and you were free to question"—in other words, an orientation to spiritual matters diametrically opposed to the one his father presented.

As with the development of his interest in pursuing a career in music, Bruce's spirituality, and his eventual involvement in meditation, can be seen as a progression from external forms of attention (his father's strict interpretation of Jewish law) to internal matters (what truly mattered to him). And like his choice of career, choosing a spiritual direction based on internal experience comes at a cost: his father's disapproval.
Let’s now take a look at the placement metaphor Bruce employs that enable him to move from matters of external to internal attention. The placement metaphor in question concerns *force* but of a different variety than we saw in Linda’s case. Whereas Linda described feeling compelled by forces operating on her, Bruce depicts himself as electing to pursue paths that entail forces and thereby lead him from one phase of life to the next.

Bruce characterizes his very decision to leave music for the monastery in force-like terms. As he explains, “the religious search or religious quest is to be the number one thing in my life…and to go in that direction and see where that direction take me and just maximize the conditions for that search. And just surrendering to that.” Note Bruce’s references to a “quest”, a “search”, going “in that direction”, seeing where it takes him, and “surrendering” to it all. In other words, his decision to pursue the monastic life is depicted with imagery evoking an open-ended path (quest, search, direction) that has a force of its own (seeing where it takes him, surrendering to it).

On the surface it might appear that Bruce’s decision to leave music behind is an act of courage. But, as his imagery suggests, turning his attention from the external demands of composing to the internal world of meditation is made possible by an underlying conception that life is made of paths and forces that lead somewhere.

Bruce’s placement metaphor of force, it turns out, can be traced to childhood experiences. In fact, the incidents already mentioned that account for the development of his external/internal metaphor theme also are at the root of
his force metaphor. For example, Bruce characterizes his decision to become a musician as follows:

I felt very much that that was a spiritual calling; that bringing forth that music felt like it came from a deep place, and that the music that I had listened to and other people’s was deep, was spiritual as anything else. So I felt like I had to fulfill, and I wanted to fulfill that calling as a composer, as a musician; first as a player, and then as a composer.

Being called to music and bringing it forth from a “deep” place point to Bruce’s notion of an underlying force at work on him.

In a second example from his childhood, Bruce portrays his spiritual development in the following terms:

I feel in my bones, it’s an intuition, that there is a transcendent dimension to life, a depth to life; that we’re connected in ways that are not obvious. And I would stake my life on that intuition. And I think that was emerging in me anyway [during adolescence], and it was that that I was drawn to. It was that kind of religious yearning, and then the sense of like a path that led there.
Being drawn to religion and having a yearning, once again, suggest that even in his childhood Bruce conceptualized potential life directions in terms of forces and paths.

Although it is not yet certain whether Bruce will find life in a hermitage satisfying, and therefore whether it will be a new career path, his use of developmental and placement metaphors fits the overall pattern seen thus far in the cases of Linda and Aaron. Bruce uses developmental metaphors to conceptualize a desired life change, namely leaving music to pursue a monastic life. He draws upon the metaphor theme of external/internal focus toward this end. But making the actual conceptual shift, and then taking the steps to implement a change, rests on a placement metaphor concerning force. As we saw, the force in question is not compulsory, as was the case with Linda. Instead, Bruce speaks of making choices to embark on different paths entailing force, and these, in turn, propel in a variety of directions.

Review and Reflection

In the popular imagination meditation is thought to be other-worldly. The assumption is that practicing meditation entails leaving one’s life—and all its mundane details—behind in pursuit of spiritual insight. To a certain extent this is true when it comes to attending retreats. Of necessity, a person leaves his or her ordinary routine for the tranquility of a remote area that is conducive to sustained spiritual development.
But for most people, including those in my study, daily meditation practiced at home or even in a meditation center is very much of this world. Indeed, as we have seen, the meditators featured in this chapter use meditation for distinctly pragmatic purposes. Linda clarifies her professional objectives. Aaron forges a new professional path and resolves his difficulty listening to authority figures. And Bruce homes in on what matters to him.

The fact that Linda, Aaron, and Bruce seek out meditation as a means for changing their lives explains the underlying pattern of metaphor use that I have described in this chapter. In other words, blending metaphors that represent a desired life changes, on the one hand, with metaphors that symbolize movement toward a particular goal, on the other, is a non-conscious means of carrying out consciously articulated wishes. The blending patterns we have seen, then, don’t emerge spontaneously or mysteriously. They emanate from the very real circumstances of people’s lives.

But why, then, don’t we see the same kind of pattern in domain-oriented identity? Because, in my view, domain-oriented identity doesn’t entail dramatic professional change. If anything, the cases we saw in chapter three revolve around attempts to maintain long-term professional stability. Martin and Richard have each been in their respective lines of work for at least a quarter century a piece. Their developmental and placement metaphors are designed to keep a good thing going. They both derive deep satisfaction out of their work and have no desire to make dramatic changes.
Of course Stephanie’s life is marked by change. But even when she goes on to found a non-profit devoted to matters of health access, she retains a part-time clinical practice. And her clinical identity, as I discussed, is to be a healer. This identity doesn’t change. If anything, launching her new organization strengthens it. Like Martin and Richard, Stephanie has been in her profession for over 25 years. She has no intention of leaving it; she only wishes to tweak what she is doing. For this reason, I argue, Stephanie exhibits metaphors that speak more to stability than to the type of dramatic change seen among the meditators.

In the next chapter I describe the supporting role reconciled blending plays in the development of professional identity. I draw upon aspects of the case studies both from this chapter and chapter three to show how metaphors support the merging of seemingly contradictory themes from workers’ lives.
CHAPTER FIVE
RECONCILED BLENDING

Thus far I have shown how complementary blending informs the construction of professional identity. Across a range of case studies I have described how workers meld together—albeit in a non-conscious manner—metaphors that are complementary in one of two ways. In instances of domain-oriented identity, people combine metaphors because of perceived shared qualities or features. Martin, for example, employs “happy accident” and chameleon metaphors precisely because they are both concerned with notions of adaptability and an openness to new forms of information.

In self-oriented identity, complementarity comes into play when placement metaphors help workers generate developmental metaphors that represent more satisfying forms of work. In Linda’s case, for instance, moving from the alienating values of the business magazine to a new freelance career premised on metaphors concerning balance and open-heartedness was made possible by her experience of feeling compelled to act upon her deepest convictions. In this, as in the other cases, workers mentally merge metaphors because of they are seen to be compatible.

There is yet another form of conceptual blending that underlies the formation of professional identity. This type, which I call reconciled blending, entails combining two sets of themes from a person’s work/personal life that appear contradictory when considered independently and yet are reconciled.
when through the act of blending. In other words, apparent surface level incompatibilities between cognitive components are reconciled when blended for the purpose of generating professional identity. As I discuss further below, metaphors play less of a central, and more of a supporting, role in this pattern of blending.

In this chapter I describe the variations of reconciled blending found across the case studies. To illustrate how reconciled blending works I will refer back to aspects of the cases from the previous two chapters. I begin, however, with a general description of the types of reconciled blending I have identified.

**Types of Reconciled Blending**

There are four classes of contradictory elements that workers reconcile through conceptual blending. The first pertains to cases when workers exhibit career continuity and stability and yet employ metaphors of discontinuity and instability. The next is the inverse of this situation: namely, when workers have careers marked by discontinuity and yet use metaphors signaling continuity and stability. The third type concerns the ongoing negotiation between autonomy and structure in workers’ lives. And the final instance has to do with balancing one’s personal vision against the values and standards of a professional domain.

In each of these four types of reconciled blending metaphor plays more of a secondary, but by no means insignificant, role. As we’ll see below, there is no one overarching pattern regarding the function of metaphor, and yet, in each case metaphor is an important piece of the cognition enabling workers to convert
contradictory elements into reconciled ones. Let’s turn, then, to each of the four
types in some detail, first looking at the contradictory nature of each of the paired
elements and then at how workers reconcile them in the service of professional
identity.

Career Continuity/Metaphors of Discontinuity

A striking pattern that has emerged is that workers who exhibit career
continuity and stability draw upon metaphors of instability and flux. What makes
this pattern striking is the co-existence of two seemingly contradictory elements.
Why is it that a worker whose career has been marked by continuity also uses
metaphors signaling opposing qualities? Although workers with continuous
careers also use metaphors of stability, the pronounced role of metaphors of flux
warrants pausing to probe this pattern. Indeed, the commonly held assumption
that outward behavior (career continuity) necessarily flows from mental
phenomena of like qualities (metaphors of stability) has been turned on its head.

My view is that career continuity and metaphors of discontinuity are
blended to prevent workers from becoming over-habituated to a domain’s
conventions or ways of thinking. Certainly career longevity affords people the
opportunity to know the work of a domain in great depth and therefore apply such
knowledge (and experience) to a wide range of situations and contexts. And yet,
lack of exposure to alternative conventions or ways of thinking runs the risk of
creating a narrow set of cognitive and behavioral repertoires for responding to
domain matters and for identifying previously unimagined yet vital sets of issues
worth consideration for pushing forward the work of a domain.
Metaphors of discontinuity and flux serve as safeguards against career complacency—and even stagnation—by introducing qualities of uncertainty and tension that, when properly harnessed by workers, act as a source of ongoing creative renewal. Renewal, and especially the related ability to adapt to the shifting conditions that are endemic to any sphere of work, is essential for career longevity. It is the rare person, after all, who spends decades performing the same type of work in precisely the same manner. At the very least, most workers must regularly bring fresh perspectives and insights to their work to feel challenged and engaged; in the most extreme cases, workers must reinvent themselves altogether in response to changing external circumstances. When seen in this light, then, any initial contradictions between career continuity and metaphors of instability dissipate when these two elements are conceptually blended for the purpose of forging professional identity.

As an example of how the reconciliation of these elements plays out through blending, consider the case of Richard, the jazz musician. Establishing a long-term career, let alone making ends meet, is notoriously difficult in jazz. Richard is among the select few who not only has earned a living as a working musician over the course of four decades, but also has met with critical success along the way. Indeed, many consider Richard to be today’s preeminent jazz bassist.

And yet, despite such career continuity, the central metaphor theme underpinning Richard’s identity—balance—evokes notions of flux, instability, unpredictability, uncertainty, and impending change. His references to balance
entail various tensions that, if not handled properly, run the risk of negatively impacting his work. Maintaining such balance, therefore, is an ongoing process that lends Richard’s work a continuous overtone of flux, instability, and the like. Performing with his ensemble members, embracing the spontaneity of improvisation, making sense of his professional development, and applying the lessons learned from a chaotic childhood are all forms of regularly occurring balancing acts among multiple, and oftentimes competing, elements.

Far from crippling his career, however, drawing upon metaphors of flux and instability has helped Richard creatively renew himself many times over the course of his career. In other words, Richard’s long-lasting career as a “jazz musician” should not be viewed as a static entity. Not only does Richard deliberately seek out a wide range of formats and influences for his own ensembles (most recently delving into big band composition, to critical acclaim), but he regularly records and performs with others leaders’ ensembles and even occasionally records as part of a trio that officially has no leader. Indeed, many in the jazz world regard Richard’s music as boundary-defying. The key point, then, is that Richard’s attention to the ongoing tensions inherent in multiple forms of balance has instilled in him a great appreciation for the unexpected. And by training his attention on such uncertainties, Richard has learned to harness them for creative renewal over the course of his lengthy career.

Career Discontinuities/Metaphors of Stability
In a pattern that is the inverse of the one I have just described, workers whose careers are discontinuous and fragmented draw upon metaphors of continuity and stability. This is not to say that metaphors reflecting discontinuity are absent in such cases. Quite to the contrary, workers with disjointed careers readily employ metaphors echoing the contours of their professional lives. This is to be expected. What is rather unexpected, however, is the frequent pairing of careers of discontinuity and metaphors of continuity. At first glance these two elements appear to be contradictory. And yet, when they are brought together through the process of conceptual blending they are reconciled, ultimately, for the broader purpose of forging professional identity.

The blending of careers marked by discontinuity with metaphors signaling stability and continuity exists as a means of engendering in workers a sense of consistency and purpose in the face of fragmented experiences. All people need to develop ongoing narratives about themselves that convey meaning and purpose over time, even when life events are discontinuous and disjointed. Indeed, the person who cannot construct a coherent narrative that reconciles past experiences with present conditions is unlikely to be able to function sufficiently. At a bare minimum, such a person is bound to experience confusion and distress. When gaps in one’s narrative are particularly wide and persistent, we can expect to witness a psychological “breakdown”.

In the arena of work, then, dramatic career shifts do not—and, I argue, cannot—occur without being counterbalanced by a sense of psychological continuity. Such continuity in the face of fragmentation is supplied by metaphors
that anchor workers around perceived consistent themes. And such notions of consistency enable workers to attribute meaning to both past and present, despite significant career changes and discontinuities. This suggests, then, that instances of dramatic work shifts do not occur out of the blue but, instead, are built up out of pre-existing psychological resources, namely, metaphor evoking consistency.

The discontinuous career trajectory of Aaron is a fitting example of this pattern. Aaron's career shift from high-pressure New York management consultant to Vermont-based publisher of Jewish spiritual books is certainly dramatic. At first glance it might appear that Aaron's new career is a complete departure from his former life. One might even be tempted to chalk up such a change to Aaron's character: namely, his persistence and drive to align the circumstances of his life with his values.

Of course Aaron's personal qualities cannot be overlooked when considering his career shift. At the same time, though, it is misleading to assume that determination alone can bring about an entirely new set of circumstances. Aaron's new career, in my view, has been made possible precisely because he has had a metaphor to draw upon that supplies him with an underlying sense of continuity and consistency. More specifically, Aaron's Jewish historical positioning metaphor (see chapter four) has allowed him to construct a sense of continuity between Jewish history and culture writ large and his present-day spiritual practices. This sense of continuity—indeed, a sense of an in-tact self—serves as a counterbalance to the vicissitudes of his professional life. But even
more than this, Aaron’s perception of the continuous nature of himself as a Jewish person becomes the very material out of which he constructs his new work life. Ultimately, then, metaphors of continuity serve both as a counterbalance to workers’ fragmented careers and an important building block for developing new professional pursuits.

Uncertainty/Certainty

Another form of reconciled blending entails combining elements of uncertainty and certainty within a worker’s life. Let me begin by discussing uncertainty. Whether due to a lack of imposed structure or the high degree of autonomy that accompanies the types of professional work seen in the cases, there is much in workers’ lives that is not definitive. By uncertainty I do mean a wholesale sense of not knowing what is going to happen in one’s professional life. Indeed, the case studies make clear that workers have strong, well-articulated ideas about what they seek to accomplish and why. And, as we’ve seen, workers use a variety of strategies to realize their goals.

The type of uncertainty I have in mind pertains to the notion that a person’s work cannot be reduced to algorithms or recipes that, when followed to the letter, yield the same results time and again. Martin and Linda are good examples to consider. Martin, as I showed in chapter three, draws upon a routine defined by what he terms “happy accidents”. The point of Martin’s routine is to encounter new, but unanticipated, forms of information that become the basis for new ideas relevant to his research. Whether browsing through
volumes in the library in an open-ended manner (as opposed to doing targeted computerized literature searches from his office), or attending conference sessions on topics beyond his area of scientific expertise, Martin not only interfaces with the unexpected but with the uncertain. Indeed, immersing himself in such routines doesn’t always result in the conceptual advancement of his work.

To a certain extent, Martin’s dance with uncertainty is a gamble. This might strike some scientists, especially those who have come of age in the era of for-profit biotechnology as an inefficient use of time, or perhaps even as a waste of time altogether. After all, time is the most precious all the elements in a worker’s life—nothing can be done to replace it once it passes. Wouldn’t it more effective for Martin to rely on routines that entail less uncertainty?

Uncertainty plays a large role in Linda’s professional life as well. To begin with, there is much about being a freelance writer that entails uncertainty. First, not having the security of regular employment is itself uncertain. Getting work takes tremendous initiative and continuously “selling” of oneself to various potential employers.

Second, freelance writing is not rooted in any one particular journalistic style or convention. As Linda herself noted, each publication has its own ways of writing and packaging stories. As a freelance writer Linda must continuously accommodate to the styles and conventions of the various publications to which she submits pieces. Not being an ongoing part of any one publication’s culture,
whereby she would have the opportunity to absorb and perfect writing conventions, presents its own uncertainties.

The other way in which uncertainty infuses Linda's life has to do with meditation practice. Like all of the meditators interviewed for my research, Linda avails herself to a great amount of uncertainty every time she practices meditation. Linda cannot be certain—nor would she want to be—about what will arise in the course of any particular meditation session. The results of meditation are not planned in advance. Indeed, part of the appeal of meditation is its open-endedness, the unexpected insights and feelings that emerge. And as we have seen in Linda's case, the uncertainties emanating from meditation have played an important role in re-shaping her values and, ultimately, her wish to leave the business magazine where she worked and pursue a freelance writing career.

The important point to stress, both in the cases of Martin and Linda, is that uncertainty is not the defining quality of their professional lives, even though it might appear to be. Martin, Linda, and, for that matter, the others whose cases I have presented, regularly pair certainties with uncertainties. In other words, workers conceptually blend seemingly contradictory elements—certainty and uncertainty—for the purpose of forging professional identities.

Upon some reflection it is not altogether surprising that workers combine features of uncertainty and certainty in their lives. Many—but not all—forms of professional work are inherently uncertain and can't be reduced to formulas that are executed to achieve a desired result. The various foci of professional work are too complex, and subject to too much debate, to fit comfortably within the
constraints of absolute certainty. At the same time, though, when uncertainty dominates a person’s work the result is likely to be inefficacy, at the very least, or outright failure, at the worst. Human beings, by their very nature, are equipped to tolerate, at most, moderate degrees of uncertainty. The capacity to make sense of experience and plan for the future depends on having elements of certainty in one’s life. Of course, what one person deems to be certain might be construed by someone else to be uncertain. But this is beside the point. What matters is that a person has the general perception that uncertainties are counterbalanced by some certainties.

What, then, are the counterbalancing certainties in Martin and Linda’s lives? In Martin’s case, there are three interrelated forms of certainty that he combines with the uncertainty surrounding his “happy accident” routines. First, the serendipity of his individual routines is framed by a broader ethos of serendipity underlying science writ large. The very fact that Martin’s practice of science is anchored in a broader professional tradition provides a counterbalance of certainty to his individually developed routines filled with uncertainty. So, although Martin’s specific strategies for interfacing with new sources of information might be unique to him, he is in fact drawing upon a domain-wide ethos that supports and legitimizes his routines.

Of course scientists adhere to important pre-established conventions for carrying out their work: posing hypotheses, performing experiments, attempting to replicate results, and building theories. These steps, among many other factors, distinguish science from other forms of knowledge and inquiry. But within
this general framework there is much room for the unexpected, and therefore the uncertain, to arise. Whether deliberately cultivated, as in Martin’s case, or unintentionally encountered, uncertainty has been, and continues to be, an important element in carrying out scientific work. For example, hypotheses, by their very nature, are tentative and uncertain constructs. Time and again, and much to scientists’ chagrin, hypotheses turn out to be off the mark. Seen in this light, then, the uncertainty pervading Martin’s work is counterbalanced by a long-standing scientific tradition that embraces uncertainty. In other words, and put somewhat awkwardly, the certainty of a scientific ethos of uncertainty provides a counterbalancing force to Martin’s individual work.

The second way in which Martin employs certainty as a counterbalance to the uncertainties of his work has to do with ongoing efforts to adapt to the institutions and departments in which he has worked throughout his career. As we saw in Martin’s case study, he uses the metaphor of being a chameleon to characterize the manner by which he absorbs the scientific foci of the institutions that have employed him. Sensitivity to institutional contexts—their emphases, standards and conventions—adds a degree of certainty to Martin’s professional life that comprises an important counterbalance to the uncertainties of his work routines. This suggests, then, that Martin’s routines are less open-ended and uncertain than they might appear at first glance. Undoubtedly, there is a marked degree of uncertainty about Martin’s routines. After all, he can’t completely predict what the outcome of engaging in them will be. At the same time, though,
Martin’s taking account of what is expected of him by various institutions inevitably influences and gives shape to what emerges from his routines.

A final counterbalancing element of certainty in Martin’s professional life is the very existence of his “happy accident” routines. While the outcomes of these routines are uncertain, the fact that he has routines to draw upon in the first place serve as a source of certainty. Martin’s routines structure his professional existence to the extent that he knows in advance how he will seek to further his work, even if the results aren’t always fruitful or satisfactory. The importance of the structure afforded by routines cannot be underestimated. More than merely accounting for how time is to be spent, routines also give shape, meaning, and purpose to existence. For Martin, routines entailing serendipity reinforce his identity as a scientist who is driven by the excitement of discovery.

In Linda’s case, there are two means by which she conceptually blends elements of certainty with the features of uncertainty I described earlier. First, and as a counterbalance to the uncertainties of freelance writing, Linda anchors her own work in a set of skills that continuously guide her approach to freelance writing. By having this set as an ongoing backdrop to her work, Linda has incorporated a degree of certainty that counterbalances the broader uncertainties associated with freelance writing. More specifically, Linda has developed a broad repertoire of writing styles that she can draw upon to suit the needs of any number of well-respected periodicals, ranging from the *Los Angeles Times* to *National Geographic*. Linda also knows how to identify stories ideas that meet
the interests and standards of such publications. She has a level of perspicacity that enables her to hit upon topics of interest that she can then “pitch” to editors.

The second way Linda has integrated certainty into her professional life has to do with her meditation practice. As I stressed earlier, much of meditation is uncertain, as one cannot plan in advance what will result from it. And yet, Linda’s use of metaphors referencing submitting to forces that enable her to uncover her inner-most beliefs has become a certainty that has reaped professional benefits. The precise outcome of submitting to perceived forces is, of course, uncertain. But the knowledge that such forces are fruitful provides an important counterbalance of certainty to an otherwise uncertain undertaking.

Furthermore, the very existence of Linda’s meditation routine is itself a source of certainty. So, although the outcome of her meditation is uncertain, having the routine of meditation provides ongoing structure, meaning, and purpose to Linda’s life. This situation is analogous to the roles played by Martin’s “happy accident” routine: namely, it is uncertain regarding outcomes but certain in terms of process. There is an important difference, however, between Martin’s routines and Linda’s meditation. In no small measure, meditation is meaningful to Linda because of the Buddhist spirituality and philosophy on which it is based. In Martin’s case there is no indication of such a broad and profound worldview in his routines.
Professional Identity/Domain Structure

The final variation of reconciled blending is most relevant to, although not limited to, the case of Stephanie, the physician. On the surface, Stephanie’s case is one of an ongoing misalignment between her identity as a healer and the rapidly changing structure and conditions of medicine. In some ways these two realms seem utterly irreconcilable. Indeed, Stephanie repeatedly invokes a personal metaphor—the dilemma she faced as a child about whether to relieve a bird of its suffering—to represent the alienation she experiences as a physician. The restrictions on physician autonomy imposed by managed care and the general trend to make medicine function more along free-market economic lines have left Stephanie with serious misgivings about her profession and the nature of her own work.

But when looked at from another angle, Stephanie’s personal metaphor and the structure of medicine are in fact reconcilable. These seemingly contradictory elements are reconciled in a manner that permits Stephanie to enact her identity as a healer. My view is that this occurs in two distinct ways. First, Stephanie’s healer identity is paired with one of the fundamental and enduring principles of medicine: namely, to cure disease. Medicine, despite the structural transformations that are re-shaping it, is still about curing disease. Precisely how this is to be achieved is the subject of debate, one that occurs primarily between physicians, on the one hand, and managed care insurance companies and politicians/policymakers, on the other. This, of course, raises
profound questions about how health care is to be provisioned, who controls medicine, what counts as acceptable levels of care, and so on. Doubtless, these are urgent questions that need to be resolved.

I suggest, though, that it is still possible and important to distinguish between the structure of medicine, on the one hand, and its fundamental principles, on the other. In Stephanie’s case, her personal metaphor speaks to the changing structure of medicine and its very real impact on how she seeks to heal patients. But at the same time, Stephanie has been able to remain in medicine precisely because her identity as a healer overlaps with the abiding principle of medicine to cure disease. One of Stephanie’s concerns is that this principle will crumble under the weight of an over-emphasis on bottom line economic matters and a business-like focus on “efficiency”. In the meantime, though, Stephanie is able to continue seeing patients, despite the quandaries she faces about how best to serve them, because of a degree of alignment—however tenuous it might be—between her identity and what has defined medicine as such over the long-term.

The second means by which Stephanie blends her physician identity and the structure of medicine has to do with the combination of her roles as part-time clinician and health care advocate (itself a blending of elements). Stephanie’s co-founding of an organization dedicated to universal health care access can be viewed in one of two ways. It can be seen either as a means for her to escape from having to practice medicine full-time (and its associated frustrations) or as a means to create a modicum of alignment between her identity and the practice of
clinical medicine. My view is that Stephanie’s advocacy work accomplishes the latter. Far from being a divergence from her clinical work, advocating for universal health care access is a means for Stephanie to address one of the key dilemmas she faces in her practice: who should have access to her services. Resolving this dilemma would help clarify the who will constitute Stephanie’s patient base.

Yet another way to view Stephanie’s advocacy work is as an adaptation to the changing conditions of medicine. Despite her deep misgivings about the direction of medicine, and the quandary she faces about how to structure her own practice, Stephanie’s advocacy work is a constructive means of attempting to change her profession for the better. Her dissatisfaction very well could have resulted in her leaving the profession altogether. But, as I suggested above, it is in Stephanie’s best interest to pursue reforms that ultimately create stronger alignments between her work and her identity as a physician.

The underlying cognition of professional identity, as we have seen, emerges at the intersection of two forms of conceptual blending. The first of these entails blending complementary qualities from developmental and placement metaphors; the second involves reconciling features that appear contradictory but are in fact amenable to being blended. Another distinction between these two forms is that metaphors play a pronounced role in compatible
blending but more of a supporting one in reconciled blending. The important point, however, is that these two variations of conceptual blending don’t merely co-exist but operate together in an ongoing, integrated, and interdependent fashion.

But cross-cutting both types of conceptual blending is the combination of features from workers’ personal and professional lives. Indeed, as the case studies have revealed, accomplishing professional work—and having an identity in place to do so—entails blending together aspects from one’s personal and professional lives. It is simply not possible to understand professional identity without reference to the beliefs and conceptions that emanate from a worker’s unique experiences. In this respect, then, combining features of one’s personal and professional lives is yet another variation of conceptual blending in an overarching sense of the term.

But why is professional identity built up out of conceptual blending and metaphors to begin with? Is it merely coincidental that these forms of cognition undergird professional identity, or is there an overarching reason that accounts for them? This is the topic I address next.
CHAPTER SIX

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AS ADAPTATION

Professional identity, in its broadest sense, enables workers to adapt to domains of work. Adaptation occurs when a person’s sense of professional purpose and meaning—professional identity—are aligned with the prevailing ethos of a domain. *Ethos* is a broad term having to do with, in this case, the established consensus in a domain regarding the conventions, habits of mind, values, culture, traditions, and various other underlying assumptions and practices deemed to be necessary for doing quality work. The worker who is unable to adapt to the prevailing ethos of his or her work is likely to be censured or, in worst case scenarios, banned from a domain altogether.

Each professional sphere has its unique ethos. So, although medicine and law, for example, might exhibit some degree of overlap when it comes to the ethos of patient care and client representation, respectively, the overriding purposes and distinct histories of the two professions give rise to very different sets of ethos.

A domain-wide ethos can be explicitly conveyed by being encoded in “official” profession-wide documents or training programs. In such cases, workers typically are expected to be able to recite key components of an ethos, based on the assumption that they have been taught about it in a formal fashion. Turning again to the example of medicine, most physicians readily cite elements of the Hippocratic Oath when pressed to state the ethos of medicine.
In other cases, a domain’s ethos can be learned informally. Workers in such situations often assimilate a professional ethos in a manner that escapes full conscious awareness. This occurs in one of two ways: 1) through observing subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) patterns of behavior among one’s colleagues in specific work contexts, and 2) by hearing what one’s colleagues say about what constitutes quality work and why. Such informal means of promulgating and absorbing an ethos is more common in loosely organized professional contexts, including the arts and the business world. But even in professions marked by a formal and explicit ethos, workers still depend on informal strategies for conveying and assimilating the underlying assumptions and practices entailed in quality work.

How does professional identity enable workers to adapt to a domain’s ethos? To a certain extent, adaptation can be understood as an alignment between the content of a worker’s identity and the content of domain ethos. By this I mean that a person’s professional self-image overlaps with the known conventions, habits of mind, culture, and traditions found in a particular sphere of work. Indeed, the workers whose case studies I have described reveal a range of alignments between the content of their identities and the content their domains’ ethos. Martin’s identity, based on the spirit of unexpected discovery, meshes with the long-standing ethos of discovery found in most branches of science. And Linda’s newly reformulated identity as a writer who draws upon a broad repertoire of styles fits well with the overriding conventions of freelance journalism.
There is, however, a second, and initially less obvious, means by which professional identity acts as a conduit for adapting to a domain's ethos. In this scenario, the qualities of the specific cognitive features underlying identity provide an essential basis for adaptation. In other words, the actual properties of metaphors and conceptual blending enhance the probability of adapting to a domain. How is this so?

Let me start by stressing, as I’ve done before, that professional identity provides a sense of meaning for the individual worker. The ingredients for meaning are put into place when key questions about oneself are answered. These questions include those such as: What kind of professional person am I? What is my professional purpose? What is the relationship between my personal values and my professional vision? How and where can I best put into practice my sense of professional self?

The answers to these sorts of questions—whatever they might be—feed into a sense of meaning because they are the building blocks of the narratives workers tell themselves and others about who they are and what their purpose is. So, if a physician answers that he or she is a compassionate, caring professional dedicated to serving disenfranchised populations in a neighborhood clinic—much in line with personal values pertaining to social justice—then the makings of a narrative are in place. A full-blown narrative comes into being when such answers prove to have a consistent means of being put into practice. This means that the fictional physician in question would find that, by and large, his or
her clinical settings are conducive to the expression, articulation, and practice of an identity reflecting compassion.

Narratives themselves, however, are based on the capacity of a person to create the perception of unity, coherence, and order. In other words, humans impose a perceived sense of unity, coherence, and order on life’s myriad experiences, even though there is nothing unifying, coherent, or orderly about human existence in itself in an a priori sense. Our existence, like that of all organisms, has no inherent meaning. And yet, as a species, we make meaning out of our existence. The human mind accomplishes this by drawing together widely disparate experiences, events, and emotions, regards some as being related in one way or another, and then creates a perception of coherence based on construed relatedness. Our minds, of necessity, operate in this fashion from one moment to the next. Without the capacity to create the perception of unity human functioning would be impossible. All that is experienced and sensed would seem like a disconnected, disjointed, and cacophonous stew debris. As Gerald Edelman notes, “the conscious brain...will integrate what can be integrated and resists a fractured or shattered view of ‘reality’”. The mind integrates disparate phenomena and closes gaps when closure might not really exist for the sake of creating a unified view of the world.

Of course what counts as unity, coherence, or order varies from culture to culture or even from person to person within the same cultural milieu. This readily observable fact speaks to my point that existence writ large has no unifying conceptual givens about it. People—and cultures—create perceptions
of unity in a manner that makes sense relative to what has been experienced before and underlying assumptions that are in place.

When it comes to adaptive professional work, then, career discontinuities, fractured or contradictory aspects of oneself, and other kinds of disparities must be bridged, reconciled, or overcome for the broader goal of having a coherent and continuous self-image and purpose. What ultimately matters is whether a worker has the subjective experience of coherence and unity, not whether an outside observer deems this to be the case. As we have seen, those whose careers are marked by discontinuity and even great disjunction have created unified views of themselves in relation to their work.

The metaphors and conceptual blending that comprise professional identity play a specialized role in enabling workers to develop perceptions of unity, coherence, and order that are necessary for narratives of meaning and, ultimately, adaptation to professional domains. Metaphors accomplish this by encapsulating complex experiences, thoughts, and emotions in relatively simple linguistic forms. In this respect, metaphors, in the form of single words or brief phrases, are conceptual structures that efficiently represent diverse elements of human experience that are deemed by a person to be associated in one way or another. In any given moment a person is bombarded by multiple forms of sensory input, both from the external environment (what is seen, heard, smelled, touched, or tasted) and from internal sources (what is imagined, fantasized, remembered, triggered by association). Metaphors draw upon some elements from these forms of input to represent distinct notions about particular slices of
experience. Developmental metaphors, as we have seen, represent particular experiences from a worker’s life history. Placement metaphors encapsulate distinct ways of orienting oneself to work.

In the case of Richard, for example, he uses the metaphor of balance to tie together lessons learned from his childhood, various professional goals, and how he orients himself to performing music. For Richard, balance—one word—is a quick means of referencing a complex set of ideas and practices that all have bearing on his professional work. And as we have seen, Richard’s approach to performing has served him well throughout his career. In other words, his metaphor of balance has played an important role in enabling him to adapt to the ethos of jazz music.

Conceptual blending, in both its forms, helps workers adapt to domains by making linkages between experiences and contexts that might not otherwise be associated. Such linkages, in turn, contribute to the experience of psychological unity needed for optimal adaptation. In the various examples of complementary blending I have discussed, workers merge qualities of developmental and placement metaphors they deem to share similar qualities. It is important to emphasize, however, that there is no objective way of determining in advance what constitutes compatibility between metaphor qualities. Each professional domain, plus the goals and experiences of individual workers, influence whether, and how, metaphor compatibility is perceived. Indeed, this is precisely what makes complementary blending adaptive. The very same worker who has construed there to be compatibility between particular developmental and
placement metaphors in one domain very well might not perceive such a compatibility in another domain. Workers actively seek compatibility between metaphors for the very purposes of optimizing chances for adaptation to professional contexts.

Reconciled blending is an adaptive form of cognition because it merges contradictory elements for the purpose of creating a unified, coherent sense of experience. The inability to reconcile at least some contradictory elements from a worker’s life would make adaptation to a domain unlikely, if not impossible. Adapting to a domain entails, of necessity, reconciling contradictions for the sake of the perception of coherence and unity. As with complementary blending, there is no objective means, in an a priori sense, of determining which contradictory features of a worker’s life can or will be reconciled. The context of a domain, plus the individual history of a worker, determine which elements will be reconciled through the blending process. Indeed, psychological adaptation is about the capacity of a person to tailor cognition—albeit in a non-conscious manner—to the demands of the environment.

When taken together, then, metaphors and conceptual blending are forms of cognition that play a crucial role in enabling workers to adapt to the ethos of the domains in which they work. This suggests a new way of thinking about professional identity: as an adaptive psychological construct. Of course alignment between the content of a worker’s identity and a domain can’t be overlooked as a means of adaptation. The absence of this sort of alignment would make adaptation impossible. My view, though, is that the content of a
worker’s identity is built up out of cognitive processes that have inherent adaptive potential. This means that when professional identity is adaptive it is because it is constructed out of cognitive processes that allow the mind to create a sense of coherence, unity, and order, even in cases when discontinuity and contradictions abound.

But it is important to emphasize that adaptation is not only a mental phenomenon. Adaptation is in equal measure a material one. In other words, aligning one’s professional identity with the ethos of a domain involves concrete actions and routines that both flow from and reinforce cognition. This notion hearkens back to Bourdieu’s concept of habitus I introduced in chapter one, whereby the mental and the material are intertwined and interdependent.

The material components of adaptation are evident in the various placement metaphors workers use to construct their professional identities. Martin’s “happy accidents” routines, Richard’s application of principles of balance, Stephanie’s experiences of a disjunction with her profession, Aaron’s historical positioning vis-à-vis Judaism, and Linda’s and Bruce’s descriptions of paths that are undertaken are all concrete behaviors and/or routines that help give shape to professional identity. As such, these material dimensions of identity form an important counterpart to the more purely mental components, and ultimately play a key role in enabling workers to adapt to their domains.

Is it coincidental that the we find the mental and the material co-existing across the case studies? My answer is a resounding “no”. In my view, mind and action are interdependent and necessary ingredients for humans to derive
meaning out of experience and ultimately adapt to their surroundings. Of course a person will not always display an equal balance between the mental and the material. At times one component is likely to be on display to a greater degree than the other. But in the main, both components inform each other for the larger goal of aligning personal experiences and aspirations with the broader social and cultural contexts of work domain.

Understanding how professional identity is adaptive has been made possible by focusing on the personal histories of workers. Seen in this light, professional identity is a psychological construct that enables workers to select and then merge dimensions of their personal experiences with aspects of their work domains. Consider, for example, what has been gained from knowing how Stephanie's childhood angst about relieving a bird of its suffering feeds into how she makes sense of herself as a physician and her broader role in medicine. Knowing only that Stephanie regards herself as a healer is relatively limiting because it doesn’t reveal how she has sought to adapt who she is as an individual to the conditions of her profession. By taking into consideration the unique contours of Stephanie’s background we have a clearer conceptualization of what has been entailed in her attempts to forge an identity in a profession undergoing a great deal of tumult. Indeed, every worker must find a way of adapting personal experiences to professional realms—these two spheres are inseparable.

Lessons Learned
The emphasis of this book has been a largely scholarly one. That is, my concern has been to shed light on the underlying cognition of a concept that is taken for granted and yet not well understood: professional identity.

Although my intention is not to provide a “how to” or self-help guide—this is beyond my purview—I think it is important nonetheless to reflect on what the implications of understanding the psychology of professional identity might be, both for individual workers and for those in a position to structure or shape professional work contexts. With this in mind, then, I present some key lessons that, in my view, emerge from my analysis.

- **It is important to have a clearly articulated personal vision of one’s work.**

  The people I featured in the case studies demonstrate putting their own personal stamps on their work by developing ideals that are very meaningful to them.

  What is regarded as meaningful to one person will not necessarily be so to another. For those with domain-oriented identity, the origins of meaningful work is more directly traceable to pre-existing characteristics of a realm of work. Richard clearly finds improvisation a meaningful aspect of his work, and yet this type of musical expression is part and parcel of jazz music. As I have shown, however, Richard’s reasons for pursuing music also have roots in his personal experiences.

  What is deemed meaningful in self-oriented identity is driven first by personal concerns and experiences. Linda’s move from high pressured yet
prestigious business magazine to a career as a freelance writer was most strongly shaped by her involvement in meditation and the ensuring insights she had about herself. At the same time, though, Linda clearly has the right range of interests and skills that enable her to find freelance writing meaningful.

- *Creating overlap between personal vision and domain standards doesn’t occur automatically or smoothly at first.*

  One must assess the whole of a domain to scope out which aspects of it seem particularly adaptable to one’s personal vision. At the same time, one must reflect on how a personal vision can be mapped onto work. These processes require ongoing introspection, on the one hand, and a perceptive eye, on the other.

  That the professionals in my research answered questions about their motivations, beliefs and backgrounds quite readily attests to their having made a habit of assessing the underlying reasons for pursuing their chosen career paths. One who has not previously thought about such matters would have been unlikely to offer, in short order, articulate and well-formed answers to interview questions. An ongoing evaluation of what matters personally and what opportunities might exist in a professional domain is a strategy that cannot be overlooked.

- *Metaphors cannot be developed spontaneously and at will.*
It might be tempting for those searching to have more fulfilling professional identities to begin by seeking to create the necessary metaphors that will serve as the building blocks of identity. But one merely cannot select metaphors that are attractive and expect them to carry the necessary meaning to construct an identity. Language is a means of capturing experiences and ideas one has had. Metaphors divorced of such profound experiences like those seen in the examples throughout this book is bound to be devoid of significance.

It is only through reflecting on various experiences, and then seeking ways to communicate and capture the essence of those experiences, that people generate meaningful metaphors. A better starting point, therefore, would be to think about what is personally and professionally meaningful and what words or expressions come to mind to succinctly capture the essence of them. In other words, querying oneself about experiences and values first is likely a more effective starting point.

- **Professional work exists in the context of a developmental trajectory.**

  At any given time a person’s work should be understood as being shaped by what kind of work has preceded it, on the one hand, and as a foundation for future forms of work, on the other. This suggests that what might appear to be career stagnation or discontinuity is likely to dissipate as one searches out further opportunities to align personal visions of work with domains that seem accommodating.
Each of the people featured in the case studies had an appreciation that work being done now is an outgrowth of what has come before it, even when previous work was dissatisfying. Recall Aaron, Linda, Bruce and Stephanie, all of whom either left or modified pre-existing careers to fashion more satisfying ones. In these cases work that was dissatisfying still played an influential role in shaping careers that are more worthwhile. Furthermore, these people recognize that what they are doing now will one day serve as a springboard for other types of work.

- **Not all domains provide equal opportunities for accommodating personal vision.**

  In some cases, one might have the requisite skills for doing high quality work in a particular professional domain. And yet the mere possession of skills doesn’t necessarily translate into meaningful work. For example, Stephanie and Aaron both achieved high degrees of success certain types of work, only to find them an unsuitable match. Stephanie has a large and loyal patient following, willing to stay with her from practice to practice. Aaron made a name for himself because of the skills he brought to bear as a consultant. Ultimately, Stephanie, Aaron and others had to seek out new work opportunities that not only matched their “skill sets” but their dispositions and personal values as well.
Employers would be well advised to examine ways a domain or institutional ethos can accommodate individual workers’ identities.

There are two compelling reasons for employers to consider accommodating workers’ identities. First, any group of workers is bound to interpret a domain’s ethos in as many ways as there are workers. An ethos is, by its very nature, broad and even abstract or vague. This is likely to sow the seeds for widely diverging interpretations among workers. Even supposedly more clear-cut principles regarding ethical behavior—such as being honest—can and will be construed differently by various workers.

Second, and as I have shown throughout this book, workers are likely to be motivated to do their work when they perceive that there are ways to create alignment between what is meaningful to them with the animating principles of a domain. Indeed, the inability to generate perceived overlaps is a recipe for failure. It is in employers’ best interests, then, to explore with workers a range of possible paths toward being aligned with a domain’s ethos. One way this can occur is for employers to get to know their employees well. By having regular conversations with workers about their objectives, what they find satisfying about work, and how these match up with a domain or institutional ethos would go a long way toward help ensure having workers who are more motivated and fulfilled.
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