ARTICLES

KNOW THYSELF—EMBRACING THE AMBIGUITY OF WAR BY OTHER MEANS

Anne Leslie

I. Upending our Origin Stories to Expand our Worldview

On paper, nothing predestined me for a career in cyber-security. Much in the same way as nothing on paper predestined me for being involved in a multinational effort like Project Seshat to study and respond to the rising threats of 'hybrid warfare' and 'gray zone conflict', or to give a keynote address at the Cardozo Journal of Conflict Resolution Melnick Symposium themed "Negotiation Strategies for War by Other Means."

And yet today, in spite of theoretical probabilities and contextual inclinations, I have a career in cybersecurity, I am relishing the opportunity to collaborate with many great minds in Project Seshat, and I am being invited to contribute my thoughts to a premier academic journal on a topic of societal and geopolitical dimensions that feels urgent and important.

One of the immediate challenges we have faced in Project Seshat is the absence of conceptual clarity and an agreed definition when it comes to hybrid warfare and gray zone conflict. NATO, for example, defines it as entailing an "interplay or fusion of conventional as well as unconventional instruments of power and tools of subversion. These instruments or tools are blended in a synchronized manner to exploit the vulnerabilities of an antagonist and achieve synergistic effects."

The child in me is awe-struck, wondering how on earth I managed to find myself in a time and place where some exceptionally erudite individuals want to hear what I have to say on the topic. The adult me is smiling, practicing genuine gratitude, and doing her best to act as if it is all just in a day's work. The child in me whispers "are you sure we're meant to be here?" The adult in me shushes the child, preferring to listen to the experts around me who have invited me in and who are validating by their invitation and attention that I am indeed worthy and have something valuable to contribute.

You may be wondering what the purpose is of such meandering into my inner psyche in the context of an article in an academic journal about hybrid warfare in the gray zone. It might seem unnecessary, disconcertingly intimate, borderline inappropriate. All of those labels —and possibly others I haven't yet considered—are precisely the reasons why I believe we all need to first take a journey inside to examine ourselves, benevolently and critically, if we are ever to understand the individual contribution each of us can make in our daily lives to strengthen the collective cohesion that supports democracy, promotes peace and prosperity, and enables well-being.

"By knowing who you are and what you stand for, you come to life's choices with the most powerful tool of all: your full self."[1] – Susan David

We need to intentionally and consistently push beyond our natural psychological comfort zone to explore the beliefs we hold about ourselves and others, our hopes and our fears, our value systems, our affiliations and repulsions to certain groups and their doctrines, our relationship to time and uncertainty, and our predominant mental models and psychological biases, before we can have any chance of successfully deciphering, navigating, and positioning ourselves in the great power competition that is at play in the gray zone all around us. Whether we realize it or not.

II. Creating Optionality in the Liminal Space Between Certainty and Possibility

Looking back over the past decade, I realize now that the inner narrative I had running in my head about myself was that while I was immensely grateful to be welcomed into new professional domains in the company of very smart and distinguished subject matter experts, I couldn't quite manage to quieten the inner critic in me who intermittently had me wondering why anybody wanted me there in the first place or what I really had to contribute.

I was a very diligent student when I was younger. I did what I was told, toed the line, was never late with assignments, and voraciously read the recommended reading lists that nearly everyone else ignored. I sought absolutes as the antidote to my anxiety and staked my self-worth on the idea that academic excellence was

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[1] Susan David, Emotional Agility (2016).

the secret to being worthy of a good life. I played it safe, keeping life "tidy." I wore myself ragged in the process and had to learn a whole new way of being, that involved embracing ambiguity instead of railing against it and accepting that "good enough" would have to be enough when an absolute answer failed to materialize.

Certainty turned out to be a false friend and an impossible standard to maintain. My formal education, from pre-school through university—had taught me that there is a "right" answer to life's many questions and conundrums. But reality came calling and debunked that theory, teaching me that there is rarely an obvious solution.

What I have faced much more frequently are life events and situations that require decisions to be made with varying degrees of urgency from an array of imperfect alternatives; situations where there is often no "good" option, where "good" is synonymous with "comfortable" and "easy" and "low consequence."

That's when things get tricky. Because our education and training typically don't equip us with the mental models and psychological resilience needed to straddle the ambivalence and embrace the ambiguity between statements that are simultaneously seemingly conflicting and also potentially true.

We are conditioned to think in binary *either/or* mode; in reassuringly simplistic but ultimately unhelpful terms of right and wrong; striving in a Sisyphean quest for certainty and psychological comfort that, in my experience, often yields short-term gain and deleterious longer-term second-order effects.

While I hold education and educators in the highest regard, my observation is that in spite of their best intentions, our current education system and proclivity to value domain specialization over broad generalist instruction, critical thinking skills, and cross-domain curiosity, have an unintended tendency to compromise our ability to optimally position ourselves—individually and collectively—by constraining our frame of reference and blinkering our perspective.

Our bounded rationality eliminates options we might otherwise have had for reaching more favorable outcomes in response to changing circumstances, without us even realizing that they were options available to us, to begin with.

Where my inner child used to urge me to remain safely within the contours of familiar terrain, I have learned as an adult to nurture a counter-reflexive ability to overcome this tendency. I have managed to decouple myself from previously practiced restrictive

thought patterns and the rigid behaviors that come with them. I compel myself to consciously suspend what I believe to be the right answer and nudge myself to further inquiry, preferring to be part of the group that arrives at the best analysis or the best solution rather than relishing the ego boost of imposing a personally held version of 'the truth' about a given situation.

"It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so." ~ Mark Twain

When we challenge what we think we know to be true about ourselves, our capabilities, other people, and the world around us, we can find that not only is our existing "lane" more elastic and extensible than we realized; but we can also end up creating a whole new lane of uncharted possibility for ourselves and a realm of options to achieve an expanded set of more favorable outcomes at every level.

Today, I advocate for radical curiosity and intellectual humility which, when combined with ambition, grit, and hard work, combine to provoke unusual and exciting opportunities that I seize in the affirmative, even when there is no pre-defined path forward or a prescribed outcome known upfront. For aficionados of serendipity, I really can't recommend this approach too highly.

III. Who am I? Who could we be?— Exploring self and group identity as a container for exploring gray-zone conflict

While I was reflecting on the chain of events and serendipitous encounters that colluded fortuitously to bring me to where I am today personally and professionally, it struck me that the concept of self and group identity could be an interesting angle to explore in this paper on gray zone conflict.

Why? Precisely because identity *isn't* often discussed in this context; and yet it seems to me that how we see ourselves, individually and collectively, and the narratives we tell ourselves about ourselves and about others are intimately linked to the relevance we accord (or not) to certain events in relation to the lives we lead, the roles we play and the perimeters of the "lanes" we find ourselves operating in.

Let's take me as an example. I graduated from business school with a dual degree in European business, spent several years working in banking, and the best part of a decade as a stay-at-home

mother to my three kids before returning to work in a succession of business development roles in technology companies.

I might have stayed on that track, had it not been for a decision to return to school to do an Executive MBA in 2014. That marked something of a watershed for me because it was the first time that I gave some really deep thought to the kind of work I wanted to do, the kind of people I wanted to work with, and the kind of company I wanted to work for. I realized that I wanted to be part of something bigger than myself, to work with people who are motivated by more than money.

Sometimes life throws us a bone by bringing people into our lives at the very moment we need them the most. A fortuitous encounter with a long-standing cybersecurity practitioner, who runs an initiative called CyberWayFinder that exists to increase diversity in the cybersecurity workforce, flourished into a friendship and mentorship. Soon after, I began looking seriously at the viability of cybersecurity as a future career option and I am happy to report that my "lane" is now public cloud risk and security, which is a professional field I never imagined I would be in, even a less a field I would be successful in.

What I want to illustrate with this example is that the labels we put on ourselves and the narratives we tell ourselves about ourselves have the effect of delimiting—rightly or wrongly—the contours of where we feel legitimate to show up. Up until recently, it had never occurred to me that I could have a role to play beyond the lanes of "parent," "partner," "friend," and "salaried employee" where I was an incumbent. I had certainly never considered a role that would involve me in a community of expert academics, negotiators, and mediators; a role that would expose me to stakeholder groups in the defense forces and national security arena where I would be invited to contribute my expertise on a topic of such wicked complexity and geopolitical importance as hybrid warfare.

Taking a step back and making the effort to infuse my observations about myself with a higher degree of objectivity than comes easily, I can say now that my former beliefs about myself were self-limiting and reductionist. It turns out that I am legitimate as a thinker, contributor, and influencer in more contexts than I gave myself credit for. I also have more agency and a higher capacity to self-direct than I realized.

And I can conceivably imagine that I am far from alone in this case.

[Y]ou can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only con-nect them looking backward. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in some-thing—your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever. This approach has never let me down, and has made all the difference in my life.
~ Steve Jobs

My point is *not* that I am gifted with exceptional capacities that set me apart from my peers and fellow citizens—on the con-trary. Rather, my point is that everyone has the agency (albeit to varying degrees) to build their awareness, direct their thought processes and decision-making, and drive their behaviors and con-sumption patterns in a manner that can either contribute positively to a liberal democratic outcome we qualify as desirable; or con-versely, undermine the fabric of our societies through the slow burn of corrosive acts of attrition.

One such current example is the pervasive popular use of TikTok in western democracies: the potential threat that the plat-form represents only catches the attention of a small, informed mi-nority, compared to the masses who are willing to cast a blind eye to the long-term toxic impact and influence of the app on its users and the societies in which they live.

Exploring identity—how we see ourselves and how we see others—is a useful endeavor in the context of hybrid warfare be-cause our worldview and our self-view coalesce to condition our pre-disposition to wonder, question, analyze, and opine on how seemingly disparate actions, decisions, and events might be linked and could be contributing surreptitiously to an aggregate dynamic of great-power competition that far exceeds the bounds of what any of us might reasonably consider our sphere of influence or concern.

'It's essential to be geopolitical!' argues the case for situating geopolitics within everyday contexts and advocates an approach that does not fixate with territorially defined states, big powers, and particular agents like US presidents. Geopolitics is embod-ied, experiential, and impactful[2] ~ Klaus Dodds

To paraphrase Australian politician, Penny Wong, we can choose not to be interested in politics, but we can't choose to be unaffected by it. Indeed, we are not all equally endowed with the same level of ability and means to contribute to shaping and pro-tecting what matters in our societies. However, there is nothing

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2 Klaus Dodds, Geopolitics (2007).

stopping each one of us from being united in caring about what matters in our societies. Nothing, that is, except ourselves.

If there is one thing that each and every one of us possesses, it is the power to know ourselves and to change ourselves. For better, or for worse.

The choice is ours.