

I've long treated the notion of ineffability with a fair bit of scepticism. Language has always seemed like far too powerful a tool for it to fail individuals. History's best speakers, writers, and artists used language to etch their literary legacy. So, when we feel lost for words, is language really to blame? Or is it perhaps just a consequence of us not knowing the right words to use, unlike History's greats? As an upcoming qualitative researcher, I'm even fearful of ineffability. If my participants resolved to not even try to articulate an experience, I'd be left with no data and subsequently no project.

Nevertheless, as I sit, trying to verbalise the amount of gratitude and connection that I feel at the end of my first Laidlaw summer, language undoubtedly betrays me. I'm left begrudgingly retreating to the word ineffable—which now takes on the character of a parental figure, ushering me back in. Ineffability embraces me, while gently muttering “I told you so.” In desperately wanting my peers to vicariously experience the intense episodes of meaning that I've felt, I will try to grab onto the words that escape me. However, I remind my peers that so much will have to remain unstated in how I feel about my project.

At large, my project has redefined my understanding of my capacities, core interests, and default attitudes, as a leader.

We often perceive leadership as a capacity that individuals possess. The phrases “leadership potential” or “leadership material” are evidence for this conceptualization. As such, most professional application processes ask a variant of the following prompt: *what do you hope to achieve as a leader?* In my Laidlaw research proposal, I was happy to answer this question with an array of promises. I promised to acquire ethics board (REB) approval for my research, despite it being my first time realising that such a thing formally exists. I promised to learn more about meditation, phenomenology, and Buddhism. I promised to figure out what qualitative research and data analysis actually was. I promised to contact strangers and convince them to become participants in my study.

As the months rolled by and nebulous future promises became active to-do list task items, I was regularly overcome by a feeling of being out of depth. Take the REB process—I spent a month trying to figure out the application procedure and who to approach for signatures. As time went by, the pressure began mounting, and I found myself brooding over a hypothetical: *what if I can't figure this out, and I'm left with no research project?* Eventually, piecing together guidance from five separate authorities, I found my way through the bureaucratic maze. I submitted my application and shortly received my official approval. Contrary to my doubts, the approval came two weeks in advance, with no additional follow-ups required.

At the literature review stage, I felt the same initial pang of fear and insecurity when trying to decipher technical papers on my topic. It took me hours to get through just a couple of pages, with all the new terms and concepts that I had to stop and Google. My hypothetical questioning returned: *what if I never get a command over this topic, resulting in a poorly developed project and paper?* However, as I became familiar with the content and stumbled upon papers explicitly calling out for the research that I was conducting, I began enthusiastically clicking my way through the rest of my reading list.

Then the time came to recruit participants. I drafted emails to meditation centres, agonising over how they would respond to my requests. I sent out the first lot of emails with yet another

hypothetical pit in my stomach: *what if I get no responses? or what if they read my email and find my project unworthy of support?* I was pleasantly surprised to find an immediate response from one of the centres. Their kindness and keenness in my research felt so heartfelt. Perhaps even suspiciously so. *How were they willing to trust an email from a student whose face they had not yet seen?* Yet, without this centre's proactivity, I doubt that I would have been able to get the ball rolling on recruitment.

When the first interview rolled around, I spent the commute to the centre deliberating: *what if I confuse the participant with my questions and end up with blank stares?* The pattern might be becoming abundantly clear now: I have a tendency to pose hypothetical questions that arrogantly infer that failure is right around the corner. My catastrophizing manifested at every new turn of my project. And each time, I watched it become silenced with feedback from the world, re-asserting that I had the capacity to make informed decisions. Witnessing this pattern so frequently has me adopting a new default view: perhaps I don't need to start with a question that undermines all inclination towards optimism; perhaps a better view is to hope for the best, trusting in the world to give me constructive feedback along the way. As a leader, easing my relationship with my capacities has left me feeling more confident than ever. My renewed confidence isn't a rowdy assumption that life will always have my back. Instead, it is a reflection of the comfort I feel in the process of finding my way.

My comfort partly comes from my newfound adoration for qualitative research, helping firmly root my leadership activity in passion. When conducting interviews, I felt the buzz of excitement emerging from spontaneous interactions with participants. Despite being strangers at the beginning, my participants would open up about their core life philosophies by the end. Memo-writing felt intuitively like journaling, which I do copious amounts of for fun. While the data analysis was at times laborious, each iteration of coding inspired novel ways of interpreting the same transcripts. Furthering this iterative process, I found myself continuing to have conversations with what I'd read throughout the day, testing the participants' theories on myself. And finally, in the data synthesis stage, observations satisfyingly turned into patterns, which soon settled into working theories. Even if I make mistakes, I can rest in the joy of each research stage.

The CliftonStrengths assessment finder extracted the following as my Top 5 traits: lover of ideas, lover of learning, strategic and analytical mind, collector of insight, and strong communicator. While I take personality test results (I've done enough BuzzFeed quizzes in my day) with a grain of salt, these qualities appear to aptly match the demands of qualitative research. The latter relies on the generation of insight through interpersonal communication, which can be stored, combined, and bolstered through contextual analysis.

Qualitative research is further built on human connection. My project allowed me to tap into the fascinating diversity of life experiences: one of my participants had survived World War 2; one had been a direct disciple of a well-known Buddhist teacher; one had lost her father suddenly at a young age; another self-identified as gifted; another had just nursed someone very dear to him in her final days, sending me gut-wrenchingly beautiful excerpts about their time together. To think that I would not have known any of them, if not for this project, repletes me with gratitude.

As uniquely interesting as each individual's story may have been, my participants were united in their warmth, humility, humour, and curiosity. Participant Romeo warmed my heart, stating that he would bring me flowers, if he saw me in person. Many of them wrote me thank you notes, cheering me on for taking on this endeavour and helping them gain a better understanding of their meditation practice. The participants were first to poke fun at themselves, pointing out their flaws, contradictions, and shortcomings. They were so content with viewing themselves as works in progress, never completed products. I coded for these attitudes in the data analysis, yielding many excerpts of evidence to support my intuitive assessments. While I did not have the space to unpack these attitudes in my final report, the participants have undoubtedly inspired me to integrate those four qualities into my default approach to leadership style. I want peers in my community to feel as welcome in approaching me as my participants made me feel.

When describing these developments, I worry that it might seem like I am using the "LinkedIn voice" – a tone of default enthusiasm and positivity about professional developments. However, my feelings go so much beyond this. Behind my scholar's cloak, now brandished with a fresh Laidlaw Scholar patch on its breast, stands a girl. Thanks to this project, the girl is the happiest and fullest that she has ever felt. Beyond being professionally formative, this project has been personally therapeutic. At times, when I was stressed and sat down to code my transcripts, I would find excerpts of wisdom that healed my momentary concerns. For example, if I was feeling anxious about falling behind schedule, it felt like participant Echo was personally instructing me to "return to that place of calmness and wholeness" within myself. Likewise, when I was beating myself up over falling behind schedule, Participant Gamma would tell me to gently observe my negative emotions with a sense of curiosity and sense of humour. Such excerpts were speaking to the uncloaked girl. I can feel in my bones that I will return to my participants' words throughout my life, finding new inspiration for outbesting my neuroses and locating sustainable happiness.

Having unpacked how my research experience has impacted my perceived capacities, interests, and attitudes, it may seem ironic that my three-page long reflection begins with a discussion of ineffability. I clearly did have words to share—1573 of them to be specific. Now, in trying to defend my choices, I might entertain further philosophical analyses into how these 1573 words still may not be the right ones for the job.

But if meditation has taught me anything, it's to not fight against the grain of reality. If my words fall short of my feelings, I accept it. Instead, I commit to channelling my feelings into tangible action. As a leader, I will act in such a way that permeates the love that I have gained for the worlds of meditation and qualitative research, while continuing to honour my participants' wisdom and equanimity. I'll leave it to my better spoken counterparts to translate my actions into more aptly-chosen words.

On the off-chance, maybe I'll get to bypass the need for words altogether—convincing my peers to go out and experience the trifecta of knowledge, meaning, and connection for themselves, as I have had the privilege of this summer. If I can do as much, my work as a leader will have gained novel and satisfying depth.