

Being abroad has ushered in an incredible amount of personal growth. I wanted to unpack five symbols representative of this growth that appeared in the last week of my LIA. These symbols come directly from my time in London, and their presence added poignance to my time there. Each of these symbols makes a unique comment on what growth in my leadership journey might look like. Together, my analyses help summarise my successes in an entirely personal and contextual manner, while documenting some of the incredible features of my adventures abroad.

Symbol 1: The Staggering Sunflowers



Picture taken at the London Zoo;

"The sunflower's recipe for growth is to keep journeying in search of the light."

Over the LIA, I attended several gardening sessions at the London Zoo allotments. Each session would begin with the participants and volunteers greeting each other, catching up on the major sporting successes over the weekend. We'd then make our way into the garden area, choosing tasks among sweeping, watering, and planting. At 11:00 am, proving that we were in London, we'd break for a cuppa and biscuit. I had come to really value tea breaks, because I began seeing them as subtle ways to show up for your community. They present an opportunity to affirm one another's existences, while taking a forced break from work.

After tea at the Zoo, we'd shortly return back to the garden to finish up loose ends. By last Monday, this routine felt entirely natural—an adjective that also quaintly describes my state of mind. Besides my love for the produce aisle in grocery stores and a pretty dismal attempt at keeping a succulent, I did not associate myself with nature. Yet, a meagre five trips to the Zoo allotments had helped draw me closer to the world I was evolved to live in—transacting with nature and community.

On the nature front, I was now confidently fulfilling the tasks assigned to me. Planting? Sure, I'll make sure to dig a square hole for circulation and shake up the roots. Watering? Got it, I'll get in about three buckets for each planter. Sweeping? You bet, but can I have the other broom; it worked better last time.

On the people front, I'd come to rejoice in the chit-chat and heart-to-hearts with the participants attending. It felt rare and precious to be sharing that morning with them, without any grandiose goals. We were simply there to be present, in each other's company, and to find healing in gardening.

The final Monday, when we walked into the Allotments, the participants and I found ourselves taking shelter under skyscraper-like sunflowers. We were on our way to the other end of the garden, but it didn't need saying out loud that we all needed a minute to take in the miraculous growth of these yellow blooms. Just a few weeks ago, trimming the sunflowers, which were on par with my own humble 5 ft 6" height. Now, the sunflowers had grown as tall as double my height.

The sunflower's recipe for growth is to keep journeying in search of the light. Upon reflection, that mirrors the growth I've experienced in finding my groove at the Zoo. I just kept following the radiant indications that my presence was serving a purpose—as little as giving participants a platform to share their thoughts or satiating some parched plants with water. Just like the sunflowers, the sum total of my growth completely snuck up on me, as I caught myself confidently navigating this wellness space.

Symbol 2: The Tastiest of all Figs



I have never had a fig so good in my life.

On Thursday, I said my goodbyes at the Fig Tree community gardening project. The project gets its name from a central fig tree on the gardening grounds, whose leaves create a canopy covering half of the outdoor space. It's funny how your mind can completely skip over such a large tree, as mine was busy scanning the premises for the participants that I would get to volunteer with one last time.

During this session, I got to meet the therapeutic horticulturalist who manages the gardening group. For 5 out of 6 weeks, our dates had not matched up. Finally in the last opportunity available, I was able to thank the leader responsible for the wonderful progress in the garden. I felt lucky to be gardening alongside Julia this day, observing her speak to plants as if they were her friends and seeing how her presence seemed to invite growth among plants and people.

I found it fascinating to find that the therapeutic horticulturalist job is one registered and promoted on the UK government website. If you'd ask me what a therapeutic horticulturalist was at the beginning of my placement, I would have taken five to Google it. But it's like my time at Fig Tree has fully prepared me to understand what Julia's job was. In her absence, I had already witnessed how being out in nature and caring for another organism can do wonders for a person's self-belief and sense of connection. I noticed myself being gentle and patient with humans, as I had to be with the plants. So, when Julia explained introduced her job to me, ironically on our first and last meeting, I felt each word resonate with my long-standing silent observations. From this interaction, I take away that perhaps a sign of a good leader is when their work speaks for itself. Julia's explanation only served to confirm what I'd already seen over the past 5 weeks.

It was only on my way out that my eyes caught sight of figs as plump and fresh as a brunch-worthy avocados. For a second, I actually thought that it was an avocado. Then, a fellow participant knocked some sense into me. She encouraged me to pluck several figs and consume them as soon as possible. These were at peak ripeness and would not be so for much longer.

It felt fitting that my work at the garden would bear fruits right at the end of time there. By contrast to the sky-facing sunflowers that took us by surprise, I totally expected the fig tree to become replete with fruit. I knew it was coming at some point. I just did not know when it would come or what it would look like.

But nothing could have prepared me for how delicious those fresh figs were. It made me pity everyone (me before my LIA) that picture dried figs when someone mentioned the fruit. The unforgettable figs I tasted represent a different kind of growth that I experienced at Mind—the type that I'd anticipated the outlines of but had to wait to experience the tantalising details.

For instance, I preempted that I would make friends while I was here and that they would have a couple of nice things and good wishes to send as I found my way out the door. But I didn't pre-empt that I would feel so fondly about all the different volunteers at the gardening group. I didn't pre-empt that their heartfelt thanks would brush the core of my being. I didn't pre-empt that one of the participants would pack me a slice of coconut cake, carving her goodbye in food—my grandmother and mother do the same to this day.

Thus, in addition to sunflower-like growth, I'm grateful to have experienced fig-like growth—the kind that does not defy, but only outpaces our imagination as leaders.

Symbol 3: A Completed Cube



The cards for each cube's face.

As part of the meditation course, each participant received a 6x6 photo frame cube. After each course session, the participants would receive a photo to mark having successfully learned about the particular meditation style (mindfulness, gratitude, metta, visualization, flow, and journaling). If they attended all sessions, they would end up with a complete cube depicting the meditation styles explored. The cube incentivized participants to return for progressive sessions. It also meant that they would leave with a physical object to remind them of their progress. In addition to commemorating the past, they could give the cube a spin to decide which meditation practice they would want to engage with, when they sit down to meditate in the future.

The day that I unveiled the cube, smiles overtook the participants' faces. I could feel a palpable shift in the atmosphere, as if all eyes were now intently on me. Gifts have a reputation for being a rather materialistic way to express respect for someone. However, a small but meaningful gift such as this cube proved to be a powerful indication that I valued their presence and wanted them to be proud of their development in the course.



The photo cube.

Meanwhile, in retrospect, the cube serves as a symbol for the interdependence of mediative practices. Alina, yoga therapist and my course co-facilitator, led a final meditation practice that combined every single meditation practice that we explored. Mindful awareness transitioned into spreading loving-kindness, which prompted a gratitude check-in, followed by a contemplative journal prompt. I find it hard to think of a more beautiful way for the course to have come to its conclusion, because all the concepts that we explored had been distilled into one demonstration of the mind states accessible to us via meditation.

The cube, hence, captures my growing appreciation for the holistic project of meditation. My growing confidence as a leader can be partly attributed to my deepening faith and understanding in my area of expertise.

Symbol 4: A Touching Card and Parting Gifts



The bounty of thoughtful gifts that I left with.

The relationships that I have gained at Mind perhaps constitute my biggest point of growth. During our final meditation session, my supervisor handed me a card with thank you notes from all the staff and many of the participants that I had the pleasure of interacting with. Reading those hand-written notes felt surreal, even mind-bending, as I tried to fathom how many people I had connected with in small and large ways in just six weeks. The knowledge that I had formed a relation to so many individuals created a phenomenological sense of expansion. I only know how to describe this felt sense in the negative sense: in the absence of loneliness and confusion about my purpose, a feeling of abundance takes over. I have a strong feeling that good leadership stems from this feeling of abundance.

I experienced a similar kind of abundance on the last day of my course. My participants offered profoundly uplifting feedback on my course. Indeed, some of my participants were in tears at the end of the course, many of them saying that they felt proud of me like I was their daughter. A few of them even brought me gifts, which becomes all the more special considering that they might have been on social benefits. The mutually

humbling gratitude was radiating out of us all, bouncing off the walls, and elevating the spirits up in the room.

These priceless experiences of bonding with other people has validated what I hope to achieve through my leadership, while previewing a future in which I make relationship-building a core component of my operations.

Symbol 5: A Soulful Smile



My departing selfie :)

A final sign of my growth over these six weeks is the beaming smile that I left with on the last day. To get the most obvious out of the way, the smile indicates how happy I was, freshly wearing the imprint of my goodbye hugs.

But allow me to breakdown the subtleties nestled within my smile. My cheeks rising so high as to render my eyes missing reveals how fulfilled I was feeling. I was enveloping into an internal outpour of joy. The Great Western Studios (the name of the office space) proudly titled in the background felt like a fitting allusion to the end of a nomad's chronicles across the pond. As I caught the bold letting in my phone's camera display, I felt the name slowly assume its incoming status in my memory, while simultaneously seeming like the end credits were playing on my LIA's film.

If I can be vain enough to call myself the protagonist of this 6-week long nomadic Western tale, I'd go so far as to say that this final shot speaks volume to my growing security in how I wish to spend my time. The smile may be partly a smirk of someone who knows how they want to spend their time in the future. I've found an outlet that appeals to my deepest values, I am exceedingly passionate about, and seem to be a good fit for. And so, instead of fear and anxiety, I securely lean into the feeling of excitement about the future.

Ultimately, what do these signs of growth ultimately reveal to me about being abroad? My LIA has been transformational in confirming what is important to me:

1. We must continue to develop norms to build community
2. We need to be connected with nature
3. Expressions of gratitude, whether you find yourself on the giving or receiving end, are universally uplifting

The sunflowers admired, figs savoured, cubes completed, and smiles sported are evident support for these principles shaping my leadership career post-London. I enthusiastically await the other signs and symbols of growth that I may be writing about, as I venture into other global contexts.