



The following is an excerpt from the upcoming book  
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## **Polarities and the Need for Vulnerability** by Kelly Lewis

Becoming a skillful polarity navigator is hard. Helping others do that is really, really hard. The easier and more straightforward part of navigating polarities is learning how they work and helping people map them—what we “do” as practitioners. The more tumultuous and challenging part of staying with the contradiction is discovering and integrating self-knowledge—who we “be” as practitioners. As many of us know, this type of learning is anything but straightforward, usually a bit messy, and often scary. It entails self-awareness, loving acceptance, and courageous action. It requires us to explore how our well-established preferences and habitual patterns might be undermining the results we seek. It challenges us to be both expert and learner, stepping out of our comfort zone to grow and expand, just as we ask our clients to do.

Navigating polarities is both a doing and a being practice—one that necessitates the head and the heart. Standing in that tension can feel like we are standing in the fire. It demands the capacity to be with our own discomfort and the discomfort of others. It suggests that we can grow into something that requires bigger capacity, more risk, and more compassion. In this way it can be truly transformational.

Along my path of becoming, I realized I was neglecting the being and the heart part of the pair. I had a strong preference for doing and approached these interdependent pairs from my head. But then, out of the blue, life offered me the opportunity to step out of the comfort of my preferred pole into something that felt uncomfortable and unknown. It was challenging, brutal at times, but I found that when I mustered up enough courage to do so, I couldn’t help but connect to myself, the situation, and the people in it more fully. It was beautiful and it illuminated how I had so often sacrificed this connection simply because it required me to expand my capacity for discomfort. It required vulnerability. And it was worth it.

This chapter outlines my personal journey and how I have applied it with coaching clients. My hope is that both new and veteran polarity practitioners will consider the essential role our hearts (and our heads) play in helping others develop a polarity practice. Perhaps sharing my personal experience with this practice will support (and challenge) your process of becoming. As you read this chapter, I invite you to consider a few questions:<sup>1</sup>

- What is your relationship to the Doing::Being, Head::Heart polarities?
- Which pole do you naturally hold? How strong is your attachment to it?
- What is at risk if you don’t navigate this polarity more effectively?

### **Discovering the Need**

I was in the midst of facilitating a leadership development program when a text from my older sister, Lisa, came through telling me to call her ASAP. My sister had accompanied my mom to a doctor’s appointment earlier that day. I gave Lisa a call. Her voice was shaky. I could feel myself bracing. She told me our mom had been diagnosed with bulbar ALS, a debilitating and unpredictable disease with no cure. I sat down,

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<sup>1</sup> Emerson, Brian; Lewis, Kelly. *Navigating Polarities: Using Both/And Thinking to Lead Transformation*. Paradoxical Press, 2019, p138.

speechless, knowing that everything had just changed. My first reaction was to hide in the comfort of the work I love with the clients I had fallen in love with. Yet deep down I knew I needed to go be with my mom and sisters. Despite my impulse, I chose being uncomfortable that afternoon. We sat with silence, the unknown, and some hard questions to which we had no answers.

As the weeks went on, and my happy place of being energized by possibilities was nowhere to be found, I was on the search for comfort. Looking back now, I can see I was “Suffering Paradox.”<sup>2</sup> The energy of a polarity had me. I swung like Tarzan back and forth from Embracing Hope to Embracing Reality. I clung to my preferred pole of Hope and resisted the Reality of the situation. I learned how my optimism relied on me being able to make everything “better.” In my mom’s case, there was no better, an extremely painful reality to accept. The fact that there was “no better” sobered me up from my naïveté—one of the overuses of my preferred pole. With awareness on my side and the loving support of my cohort (fatefully, three months prior to my mom’s diagnosis I had begun a two-year Polarity Mastery Program), I began to allow it all in.

I greeted Reality, the truth of the interdependent pair, and my relationship to it. I could see my attachment to Possibility and my fear of losing my optimistic outlook. Humbled by how much of my identity was attached to “betterment,” I watched my ego kick and scream as I loosened my tight grip on this protective strategy. At the end of the day, I chose love over fear. I stepped into the vulnerability rather than away from it, opening up rather than armoring up, and to my surprise discovered a more expansive space that lived between Hope::Reality. I called it Faith. This space included both poles and excluded neither. It was a place where Hope could accept and withstand Reality and Reality had a buoyant texture to it. It consisted of a kind of knowing that didn’t need to know for certain and yet didn’t dismiss knowledge either. It was sustained by awareness and deep acceptance and had the capacity of the human heart on its side.

Acceptance is a loving act done with an open heart. Like awareness, acceptance is experienced when we bring our full attention to the moment and sit with a deep trust of what is. Asking questions like these, without judgment, can help with acceptance:<sup>3</sup>

- In what ways have the benefits of my preferred pole made me successful and/or comfortable?
- What are the real impacts of the overuses on this situation and those involved?
- How have the overuses resulted from my desire to get the benefits I value?

Poignantly, my mom’s last weekend on earth was also the last weekend of our mastery program. Instead of graduating with my cohort, I graduated with my mom in her home. Our dance with one of life’s greatest paradoxes, Life/Death, and my struggle with the polarity of Hope::Reality illuminated for me that acceptance is the end of separation, the end of two and the opening to one. It taught me how to participate in, rather than separate from, the interdependent nature of the polarity dynamic. Acceptance facilitated my ability to withstand the fire and vulnerability accelerated my ability to accept.

### **Applying the Learning**

As I emerged from one of the most beautifully grueling, richly rewarding, and sweetest gifts of my lifetime, I was exhausted, relieved, grateful, heavy with grief, and really curious. I wondered how my struggles navigating paradoxical tensions were similar to and different from what my clients were experiencing. I

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<sup>2</sup> Brian Emerson. *Navigating Organizational Paradox with Polarity Mapping*. PhD diss., Fielding University, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Emerson; Lewis. *Navigating Polarities*. p138.

was curious to explore how my learning might be useful to my clients on their journey. I wanted to examine how vulnerability played with Barry Johnson’s work and how it influenced what my clients did when they encountered a polarity.

I was many months into a coaching relationship with a 40-something CEO. His executive team considered him a “deeply caring, extremely smart problem solver with a strong desire to be the best leader he can be; solid in decisiveness and thoughtful, he needs to work on being more present, less anticipatory, and more trusting of his people.” Our work together had centered on his desire to be more intentional in his leadership and feel less on the defense. On one particular day, Jordan immediately told me about an earlier conversation with a colleague. His voice quickened and his breathing became shallow as he blurted out, “He caught me off guard and I hate being caught off guard.” I learned the two things that Jordan valued most that day—predictability and stability. Jordan did not like surprises and “spent a lot of time and energy anticipating responses so he would never be caught off guard.”

I had introduced Jordan to polarities earlier in our relationship. He appreciated the concept of paradoxical tensions and quickly saw the value of a *both/And* mindset in his organization, leadership, and personal life. Like many of my clients, despite Jordan’s most valiant efforts, he often slipped back into an *either/Or* mindset and treated the polarities he encountered as a problem to solve. I brought the polarity of Structure::Flexibility to Jordan’s attention and asked him if he wanted to look at the situation using this lens. He was grateful for the reminder and a bit humbled that he wasn’t able to see this dynamic himself. I reminded him that “seeing” is one of the most difficult yet most important aspects of working with polarities. After all, we can’t change what we can’t see. As we wrapped up our conversation, I wondered what might be at risk for Jordan if he loosened his grip on predictability to make room for finding unexpected solutions to some of the organization’s problems.

Later that week, a dear friend and colleague sent me a link to one of Krista Tippett’s On Being podcasts. It was an interview with Brené Brown called “Strong Back, Soft Front, Wild Heart.”<sup>4</sup> They were discussing how to move beyond the crises of our lives. It felt serendipitous given my experience with my mom. I listened to the podcast that evening and about fell out of the bathtub when Brené Brown talked about the correlation between our ability to stand in the “tension of the and” and our capacity for discomfort. She suggested our need for *either/Or* is driven by our fear of the vulnerability required by *both/And*. Her words completely resonated with my own experience and what I was now noticing in my clients. What a moment of complete clarity—vulnerability not only played with Barry’s work, I could see how it stood at the center of it.

I heard something else that evening that gave me a moment of pause. Brown spoke about “strong back, soft front, wild heart” as a practice of integration—the opposite of living in a world of false binaries. One of her teachers, Roshi Joan Halifax, says that far too often our professed strength comes from fear, not love. Instead of having a strong back, we have an armored front shielding a weak spine. If we strengthen our back and develop a spine that is flexible yet sturdy, we can risk having a front that stays open and curious. The mark of a wild heart is being able to live within the discomfort of these paradoxical tensions without giving into the comfort of the *either/Or*.<sup>5</sup> Was that what I had experienced—a practice of integration, a wild heart, showing up in our vulnerability and our courage—when I’d discovered the space in between Hope::Reality?

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<sup>4</sup> Brown, Brené. *Strong Back, Soft Front, Wild Heart*. RadioPublic, On Being with Krista Tippett, 2018, Feb. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Brown, Brené. *Dare to Lead: Brave Work, Tough Conversations, Whole Hearts*. Random House, 2018, p90.

The dots were connecting and generating more curiosity. I sensed this practice of integration would be useful as my clients encountered polarities, and I knew from experience it was going to require emotional capacity and mindful attention. I couldn't wait until my next coaching conversation with Jordan. We had agreed to work the polarity of Structure::Flexibility. I had a hunch we needed to engage his heart as he made sense of his relationship to this interdependent pair. I decided to keep the map operating as a framework in the background. We explored each quadrant using coaching questions and recent 360 feedback. It went something like this:

- **Benefits of Structure** (his preferred pole): I asked Jordan to imagine he'd just walked into a conference room and people didn't know he was there. He hears people saying, "Jordan spends a lot of time independently considering all options. He can anticipate the next question and what people are thinking." Jordan was sitting across from me absolutely beaming. His smile was bright and his chest proud. I asked him how it felt to hear this. He said it felt "delightfully affirming" and that he could "hear this every day and it wouldn't be too much." I encouraged him to hold onto this feeling and we moved on.
- **Overuses of Flexibility** (his less preferred pole): I asked Jordan to imagine he'd just jumped on a conference call but his executive team didn't know he was there. He hears the team saying, "Jordan was caught completely off guard on our investor call this morning. He had no idea how to answer Carol's question and completely missed her point. It wasn't good." Jordan's fists were balled up and he looked like he was ready to throw a punch. He said, "I hate how this feels and hate it when I put myself in this situation. This feels just like it did a couple of weeks ago." I let that land and we both sat with the intensity of this emotion.
- **Overuses of Structure** (his preferred pole): I asked him to recall his recent 360 feedback. "One of Jordan's overused strengths is he thinks so much about the conversation before it happens it can feel pre-meditated. When the direction of the conversation doesn't align with what he is thinking, he gets locked in to his way of seeing the situation. It really gets in the way of his listening and collaborative problem solving." Jordan looked at me and said, "Wow. I feel a little silly. I never realized that my value of predictability could result in my defensiveness and rigidity." I affirmed his new awareness and offered that it doesn't have to be this way.
- **Benefits of Flexibility** (his less preferred pole): I told Jordan to imagine it is a year from now and we gather 360 feedback from his team again. This time they say, "Jordan is truly listening to me from my perspective. He brings ideas to the table and is open to finding creative and unexpected solutions to our biggest challenges." Jordan's voice sounded hopeful. "This would be great to hear but I might get taken advantage of if I do that. I am not willing to give up my ability to anticipate to become more adaptable." I knew this voice. It was the voice of vulnerability. Jordan was assuming he had to give up what he valued the most. It wasn't that Jordan didn't want to be adaptable; he was afraid of losing predictability.

We were now outside the boundaries of the Polarity Map<sup>®</sup> and inside the heart of the conversation. We got curious about the vulnerability we'd stumbled upon as he considered becoming more flexible, and we wrapped up that day by exploring a practice of integration, something I now call the Transformational Third Way in my book, *Navigating Polarities*.<sup>6</sup> I said to Jordan, "What if you don't have to let go of predictability? What if you could loosen up your grip on it so you can expand and make more room for adaptability? What

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<sup>6</sup> Emerson and Lewis. *Navigating Polarities*. p31

would that be like?” It was a relief to Jordan when he realized I wasn’t asking him to give up a part of how he saw himself in order to become something someone else wanted him to be.

Over the months ahead, Jordan slipped in and out of an *either/Or* mindset and swung from flexibility to structure and back again as he encountered the risk of “losing control”—the fear he sometimes struggled to face as he worked to embrace both poles and eliminate neither. Like many of my other clients, he started to appreciate this could be a practice of many years and that he’d make many mistakes before he learned how to do it. Some exercises, practices, and experiments that helped Jordan increase his capacity for vulnerability included:

- **Putting it in perspective:** Ask yourself: Is it really scary or does it just feel scary? Usually the step we need to take isn’t actually as scary as it is in our heads. Fear is typically divorced from any concrete or immediate danger. It feels scarier than it actually is. It is typically about something that might happen not something that is happening now.<sup>7</sup>
- **Expanding what you can see:** Ask yourself, What is true? And, What is also true? Remove the judgment and practice being with all that is true—what is easy for you to see and what requires a harder, deeper look.
- **Accepting how you feel:** Feelings, especially the uncomfortable ones, are often avoided, numbed, or resisted. Focus your attention on the feeling. Watch it without identifying with it. Accept that it is there. No need to think about it, judge it, or analyze it. Know that the feeling isn’t who you are. Don’t make an identity for yourself out of it (I am \_\_\_\_\_). Stay present and continue to be the observer of what is happening inside of you.<sup>8</sup> As the sensations of these feelings become familiar, the capacity for vulnerability increases.
- **Bringing joy into the practice through safe-to-fail experiments:**<sup>9</sup> We are often most successful at sustaining a practice over time when a flywheel effect propels us into continued learning through a mixture of failure and success. Safe-to-fail experiments are small, pragmatic, within our control, and “at the edges” of our issue. Start with a direction, not a destination, to allow for learning along the way and to keep open the space for joy. The more one can hold experiments lightly, embracing the playful side of learning, the higher the likelihood of continuing to experiment, learn, and transform.

When Jordan could stay aware long enough to accept the interdependent nature of the dynamic, his vulnerability became availability, unlocking his mind and pulling his heart open to the Third Way. But, when he stopped paying attention or resisted the contradiction, vulnerability collapsed into fear, pulling his heart apart and further entrenching him into his preferred pole. As time went on, Jordan found a more intuitive way of knowing that allowed him to experience the reality of *being* with both “this” and “that” Jordan also found the Third Way between Structure and Flexibility. He called it Attentive Openness. He learned to come back to that place again and again.

### Being in the Practice

The more we prefer a pole, the more likely we are to unknowingly construct part of our identity around it. In my case that sounded like, “I make things better” and in Jordan’s case it sounded like, “I know.” The

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<sup>7</sup> Eckhart, Tolle. *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*. New World Library; Namaste Publishing, 1999, p43.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p40-41

<sup>9</sup> Berger, Jennifer G. *Three Key Ingredients to Learning From Failure*. Cultivating Leadership, Blog, 2015, July 19.

strong attachment to our preferred pole sets us up to feel as if we are being challenged or confronted when met with our less preferred pole. This is when we are at greatest risk of defaulting to an *either/Or* way of operating and convincing ourselves that we are right and “the other” is wrong. When we do this in a polarity situation, it leads to what Brian Emerson calls Suffering Paradox, discussed in chapter 34.

As I wrote about in *Navigating Polarities*,<sup>10</sup> I also came to learn a lot about the emotional capacity needed to stand in the Third Way. While grief, loss, fear, and vulnerability are part of the common ground of humanity, they are ground many of us were never taught how to stand on. It was a humbling discovery, one that continues to serve as a reminder that I must be attentive to expanding my own emotional capacity and be adept at wading into these emotional waters with my clients. Finding ways to help others understand the natural tendency to pull away from discomfort and name what feels risky about being with *both* “this” *And* “that” is important. So important, in fact, we developed the Polarity Navigator, a sensemaking tool that builds on the Polarity Map, to allow for the exploration of the reintegration of the poles and the vulnerability it takes to stand in the tension of paradox, two topics that are vital to the conversation about polarities. Without this exploration, our fear of the opposite downsides or losing a part of our identity can keep us from operating from *both/And*.

Think back to the Doing::Being and Head::Heart polarity we began with. I encourage you to consider these two questions:

- What part of your identity might be constructed from the upsides of your preferred pole of Doing::Being or Head::Heart?
- How might the fear of losing that keep you from embodying both?

No matter what you chose to call it—standing in the tension of the *And*, standing in the fire, operating from the Third Way— *both/And* is an internal shift through which our basic identities are reconstituted. This kind of transformation requires our active engagement. It is an invitation to feel the fear and do it anyway. We can’t think our way through it. It isn’t a strategic plan or a map we execute. It is a practice that requires a strong back (courage), a soft front (open-ended willingness to be vulnerable), and a wild heart (not giving into the certainty and comfort of *either/Or*).

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<sup>10</sup> Emerson and Lewis. *Navigating Polarities*, p45.