Good afternoon. It is an honor to participate in the staff leadership summit. Kathleen Ames-Oliver requested that I speak about my personal experience in leadership roles, and I will. In order to frame my comments, I want to begin with one of my favorite critiques of contemporary organizational life and leadership practices, Scott Adams’ Dilbert.

In the first panel, the boss as leader discusses with his leadership team the decision-making process and the qualities of a “good leader.” And as panel #2 demonstrates, Dilbert is called to “lead from where he is.” So, in panel #3 he poses the key question: can technology do this for us and more efficiently? As we move through the rest of the comic strip, there is collaboration that keeps the conversation moving, although in a dysfunctional and ultimately frustrating manner. In the last panel, in anger, the boss reasserts his initial statement about how a “good leader” makes a
decision: “It’s a process!” [At the end, when a voice out of the frame asks, “Is that your colon
talking?,” I wonder if this is Scott Adams’ nod in comic strip rhetoric toward Robert Sutton’s book
about verbal bullying in the workplace: *The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving
One That Isn’t* (2007).]

*Dilbert* does not represent the setting of a large research university, but the dynamics
portrayed here may resonate with experiences we’ve all had. And I also want to suggest that the
comic strip is painfully funny because it also reminds us of the aspirations, the hopes, and the
dreams that we invest in our work. I want you to think about *Dilbert* for a moment in terms of the
dysfunctional downside it represents as well as the unrepresented and unrealized utopian upside that
it invites us to imagine. On the downside, the comic strip portrays a meeting in which hierarchy
produces passive-aggressive resistance. Dilbert is our hero, he leads from where he is, and he is
leading the team to ensure that change does not occur. On the upside, everyone in this meeting has
a place at the table, the way they are going to interact about making decisions is under discussion,
and everyone realizes that the choices made at that table can change their workplace.

There are many other downside/upside contrasts I could explore here. There is symbolic
stonewalling vs. meaningful conversation. There is a power hierarchy vs. roles with responsibility
and authority. There are many others. One that especially stands out for me is Dilbert’s call for
technology to take over precise decision-making, and the boss’s linguistically imprecise call to to
listen to yourself, “to your gut,” when making a decision. Dilbert’s question implies “management
thinking” aimed at increasing efficiency and productivity, and the boss, even with his anger, is
struggling to introduce personal intuition into the professional equation. In the microcosm of eight
brief comic strip panels, we see portrayed the dilemma of leading from where you are, the dilemma
of management principles pitted against leadership qualities, the dilemma of how meaningful
engagement could be created.
My title today is “Professional Engagement, Personal Learning.” I want you to consider today some of the tensions that emerge between “professional” and “personal” when each of us strives to lead from where we are, and how these tensions engage us and propel us to learn. These two adjectives evoke an ideal separation of spheres that we all strive to uphold. Implicitly, we agree to divide the world into two spheres: our professional lives in the public workplace and our personal lives in private, outside the workplace.

But, the division is not so neat and clean as we sometimes think. We spend a remarkable amount of time—a remarkable amount of our lives—in the workplace. While we “work through” our identities outside the workplace, at the same time we live and perform our identities publicly within the workplace. In addition to the reality of a paycheck, food on the table, and the quality of our private lives, we are invested in what our work means to us. We care deeply about the impact that we can have on the world through our work at the University of Kansas.

Poet and corporate consultant David Whyte, in his book *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America*, reminds how prohibiting it can be when we labor under “a narrow image of what it means to be professional” (70):

> We are all aware how work both emboldens us and strangles our soul life in the very same instant. It reveals how much we can do as part of a larger body, literally a <em>corpus</em>, a <em>corporation</em>, and how much the wellsprings of our creativity are stopped at the source by the pressures of the same smothering organization. (29)

What is needed is a greater mindfulness of the ways that work (the professional) is a central arena for our individual growth (the personal). Our professional engagement is a meaningful and constructive outlet for our creativity.

You are here today because you want to grow professionally and personally. It is through this alignment of the professional and the personal that we can cultivate our souls. When we lead
from where we are, our professional engagement is an experience of personal learning that makes us whole across the division of public and private spheres in which we move.

Over the past few years, I have held multiple leadership roles at KU. It always feels a bit dizzying when I listen to the succession of professional titles read in introductions. What this list of titles means for me personally is that I have drawn heavily on the energy that I get from learning, and I have certainly had my share of learning curves each year to charge my batteries.

With the exception of one transitory year as an interim, in my other choices I always had the expectation of much longer terms of service. Yet through this experience of change, I have had multiple opportunities to develop my own strategies for striving to be an effective leader and to keep my life whole through professional engagement and personal growth. More than lessons learned from these experiences, these are lessons that I am still learning and putting into practice, and I want to share a few of these lessons with you today.

**Lesson #1, bring in the poetry.** I mean this metaphorically and literally. Metaphorically, I have in mind an observation made by Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal in their overview of organizational theories, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*. Whereas the boss in the “Dilbert” comic strip tried to talk about his “gut” as an “indefinable leadership quality,” Bolman and Deal advise leaders to be aware of the intuitive and the inspirational in terms of an artist’s creativity: “The leader as artist relies on images as well as memos, poetry as well as policy, reflection as well as command, and reframing as well as refitting.” To state this differently, to lead from where we are, we need to be able to summon internal imagery that helps us reframe the choices and challenges we face. For me, both in my teaching and scholarship as well as in my administrative leadership, I frequently draw upon the metaphor of a conversation. Many of the lessons that I am learning emerge from my awareness of the multiple conversations going on within the university.
Through our conversations we each give a voice to leading from where we are and we learn to listen and respond to the other voices in the conversation.

As I noted in my comments about the *Dilbert* comic strip at the beginning, the leadership parable it portrays in dysfunctional form also reminds us of that utopian ideal of the planning table where a meaningful, inclusive dialogue takes place. I will return to the conversational imagery in my later comments, but I also want to underscore that I literally mean “don’t forget the poetry.” Here are some lines from a poem by William Carlos Williams:

My heart rouses
    thinking to bring you news
    of something
that concerns you
    and concerns many men. Look at
    what passes for the new.
You will not find it there but in
despised poems.
    It is difficult
to get the news from poems
    yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.

(“Asphodel, That Greeny Flower”)

I strive to be open to creativity, and regularly reading poetry helps me cultivate this openness. It gives me the “news” referred to in this poem, the “news” necessary to sustain our lives so that we do not “die miserably every day.” I am going to insert a few lines of poetry amidst the rest of my comments with the hope of showing you some of the connections that it gives to me. Reading poetry engages me in a way that keeps me refreshed personally, and it also helps me practice the next lesson that I am learning professionally.

**Lesson #2, be present.** The only way to be fully engaged in the conversation that we are striving to lead, in which we are striving to participate, is to be fully present. This means listening,
and listening carefully, much like you do when you read a poem. When you listen with mindfulness, you are not planning your response or rebuttal; you are listening from where you are to the other person who is giving voice, speaking from where she or he is. Quite often, what that person may most want from you is not your response or a solution, but simply to know that you have heard them, that there has been genuine connection. And if you are going to respond, it is fundamental to be certain that first you have listened. Being a good listener is crucial for success as a leader.

A short poem by Emily Dickinson reminds us of the importance of this listening, of hearing the words of our conversational partners, because words truly matter:

A WORD is dead
When it is said,
Some say.
I say it just
Begins to live
That day.

This respect for words with a life of their own can guide not only in our listening but also our speaking. Viewing leadership and work as a conversation also means that we speak up to set expectations, that we negotiate and come to agreements, that we give feedback to others. This is much easier said than done. We get busy. Communication is sometimes hard. And we have the choice every day to make our world like the dysfunctional conversation in *Dilbert* or to be mindfully present as we strive to make the conversation meaningful.

**Lesson #3, set your intention.** By this I mean that it is important to know your mission, what you are committed to making happen, and to keep present this mission as you participate in the conversation. Two pieces of advice if you run into obstacles here. Obstacle #1 is that sometimes you may not be clear about your intention. One approach that works for me in gaining clarity is keeping a journal. On the page, I can test out my thinking. Regularly writing in a journal can help turn off the internal editors who lurk in the back of our minds and silence our voices, undermine
our self-confidence. As Jennifer New puts it in her book *Drawing from Life: The Journal as Art*: “A journal can play the role of teacher when one allows it to, whether in slowing us down or in retraining our eye. It assists us in seeing the unexpected, to revel in incongruities. […] In the end, journals may show more fully than any finished piece what it has meant to be us.” The parallel obstacle #2 is remembering that leading from where you are is not about perfection; it is about knowing where you are right now. Mary Oliver’s poem “Wild Geese” begins with these lines:

You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.

Reading this poem with relation to leadership, leading from where we are is not about the penance required to make us perfect, better, or acceptable. As David Whyte notes in his reading of this poem, being present and setting our intention is about letting ourselves love what we love, learning to participate wholeheartedly in the conversation from where we are in the present. With this idea in mind, I especially like the closing lines of the poem. After a reference in which the speaker of the poem directly addresses the reader as “you” and invites the reader into a conversation about loneliness—a conversation to overcome loneliness—she turns to the image of viewing geese heading home across the sky. The act of viewing that image mindfully grounds us in the present, in the place where we are.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

To set your intention is to become open to your mission, to see the world from a grounded position so that your imagination is engaged and you understand that the world “offers itself” and “calls to
you” to lead from where you are. For me, as the dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the word “imagination” in these last lines resonates strongly. So much of what happens in the College, from Natural Sciences and Mathematic through the School of the Arts, is about imagination. Research and scholarship are the imagination made real, made reality.

I thank you for the opportunity to share with you some of the lessons that I am learning: bringing in the poetry, being mindfully present, and setting your intention. I consider myself fortunate to have the opportunity to be professionally engaged at KU and to continue growing personally. And one of my goals at present—contrary to the quick changes of recent years—is to be present much, much longer in my current role. As I bring my comments to a close, there are two images that stand out for me when I think about KU at present, and I think that they will make sense to you in the context of my comments.

First, right now, KU is engaged in a university-wide conversation about strategic planning and we are all asked to speak from where you are as we collectively set our intention for the future. The conversation is taking place in multiple arenas and includes representatives from across the university. There is also the invitation for each of us to participate in the virtual conversation that is taking place on the discussion boards hosted through the Office of the Provost. I encourage you to accept the invitation to participate.

For a second image, I remind you that KU is on a collective journey as an institution. Strategic planning is allowing us to map out the path we will follow in the upcoming years. It is a journey that we often discuss in terms of the next decade, and yet we will take the trip one step at a time.

I want to pull together these various images and lessons by reading one final poem by David Whyte, “Start Close In.” In this poem, Whyte writes about conversation and finding your voice,
about a journey and the first step you need to take, and about the courage to lead from where you
are right now.

Start close in,
don't take the second step
or the third,
start with the first
thing
close in,
the step
you don't want to take.

Start with
the ground
you know,
the pale ground
beneath your feet,
your own
way of starting
the conversation.

Start with your own
question,
give up on other
people's questions,
don't let them
smother something
simple.

To find
another's voice,
follow
your own voice,
wait until
that voice
becomes a
private ear
listening
to another.

Start right now
take a small step
you can call your own
don't follow
someone else's
heroics, be humble
and focused,
start close in,
don't mistake
that other
for your own.

Start close in,
don't take
the second step
or the third,
start with the first
inghing
close in,
the step
you don't want to take.
Works Cited

My thinking here has been prompted by the writings of Jon Kabat-Zinn on mindfulness meditation and David Whyte on poetry and work. All of the poems cited are available on the Internet on multiple webpages; many of them are recited by David Whyte on his audiobook *Clear Mind, Wild Heart*. I thank Andi Witzcak and Linda Luckey for sharing the books by Jennifer New and by Dannelle D. Stevens and Joanne E. Cooper.


