LEADERSHIP TAPESTRIES

by Jake Tawney, Chief Academic Officer
Great Hearts Academies

The Hunt of the Unicorn, one of seven tapestries known as *The Unicorn Tapestries*, originally crafted around 1495-1505 in the Netherlands. The set now hangs in the The Cloisters in New York City.

One of the oldest forms of art is tapestry weaving, and among the most famous examples are "The Unicorn Tapestries." This seven-piece collection dates to sixteenth-century Paris and depicts the hunt of a unicorn set in an idealized French landscape. I have always been fascinated by the idea of weaving together individual strands to form something this intricate. As turns out, there is also an entire area of mathematics called braid theory, which is situated in the broader area of knot theory.

Braids, Not Knots

What is true in pure mathematics and the fine arts is also true in leadership: when strings are woven in and out of one another in intentional ways, the result is something that is greater than the sum of its parts. The process of leading teams and of sitting alongside others on a team is like the construction of a braid, and in its best form, the creation of a beautiful tapestry.

We all have strands in our work that overlap with the work of colleagues. To ensure that the overlap is a coherent braid rather than a tangled knot, a leader must do three things. First, he or she must have a vision for the tapestry, the oft mentioned "beginning with the end in mind". This teleological approach is so important to classical education and no less so for leadership because, when done well, it emphasizes purpose. For example, headmasters need to ask, "What is the purpose of a classical school?" For my own part, I need to ask, "What is the purpose of a national academic team?"

Second, the leader must know the threads necessary form the tapestry. These are the "first principles" of the work being led. For example, the Great Hearts academic team consists of three distinct strands: curriculum, student achievement, and production of the annual Symposium. A school, of course, has far more than three. Whatever the situation, a leader needs to be able to identify the unique strands of work necessary to achieve the vision. That said, identifying the strands is only partially about the work – it is also about finding and developing the person who is best suited to guide each strand.

Finally, and perhaps this is the most difficult part, the leader must be able to help team in the braiding process itself. We can have a well-articulated vision for the tapestry and the correct threads both identified and organized, yet still fail to braid properly. Just as mathematical braid theory seeks to precisely describe the "moves" necessary to turn the original strings into the desired pattern, a leader must describe and implement the precise braiding moves that will turn the team threads into the desired tapestry of work. This team braiding will not happen on its own. If the leader fails to guide each thread towards the vision for the entire tapestry, the inevitable result is a knot rather than a coherent braid.
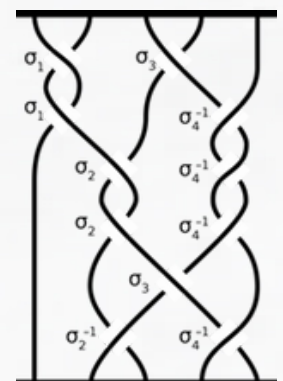
A braid intertwines some number of strings attached to top and bottom "bars" so that each string never "turns back up."

As important as the weaving together of your team members' work is, it is equally as important to see how the entire team's work fits into something larger. It takes humility to recognize that, no matter what your post, the work is always bigger than that which is directly under your leadership. This is true at all levels. A third-grade lead teacher works in cooperation with other grade-level leads as part of a school being guided by the headmaster, and the headmaster is part of the cohort of schools that makes up Great Hearts. In my own post, the work of the academic team sits alongside the work of professional development, a separate team dedicated to serving our teachers to help them become master craftsmen. A good leader needs not only to be able to guide his or her own team's work, but also to weave together with other leaders and teams to create something even more magnificent. This brings me back to the opening example of the Unicorn Tapestries. No matter how beautiful an individual tapestry is, its fullest beauty is found in the coherent story formed by the series as a whole. If the whole is not kept in mind and a leader starts grasping at threads being guided by others, multiple tapestries will end up in a tangled mess.

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This creation of coherent tapestries is something of what the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay understood when she wrote, "Wisdom enough to leech us of our ill is daily spun; but there exists no loom to weave it into fabric." She is speaking of something bigger than just leadership – she is speaking of an age in which a "meteoric shower of facts … lies unquestioned and uncombined." And yet, there is something here that is useful for leaders who are tasked with braiding together the work of their team members and coordinating the braid with that of other teams.

THIS GIFTED AGE

Upon this age, that never speaks its mind,
This furtive age, this age endowed with power
To wake the moon with footsteps, fit an oar
Into the rowlocks of the wind, and find
What swims before his prow, what swirls behind ---
Upon this gifted age, in its dark hour,
Rains from the sky a meteoric shower
Of facts . . . they lie unquestioned, uncombined.
Wisdom enough to leech us of our ill
Is daily spun; but there exists no loom
To weave it into fabric; undefiled
Proceeds pure Science, and has her say; but still
Upon this world from the collective womb
Is spewed all day the red triumphant child.

Edna St. Vincent Millay
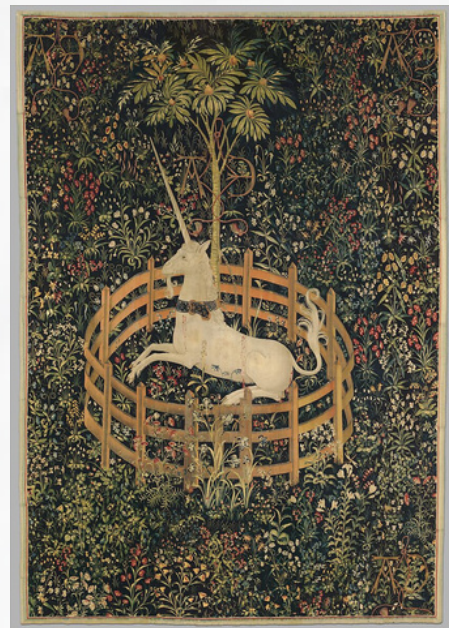
The Unicorn Rests in a Garden, one of the seven tapestries known as *The Unicorn Tapestries*.

Jake Tawney serves as the Chief Academic Officer for Great Hearts Academies, a network of classical charter schools across multiple states. After earning an undergraduate degree in mathematics and computer science from Denison University, Mr. Tawney continued his studies at The Ohio State University where he obtained a masters degree in mathematics. He taught all levels of high school mathematics and computer science for nearly a decade before taking on the role of Director of Student Services for a district in central Ohio. During his time in Ohio, Jake also taught at the Pontifical College Josephinum, including courses in Euclid and the Philosophy of Mathematics. In 2014 Mr. Tawney relocated his family to Phoenix, AZ to join Great Hearts Academies. Jake is a proud husband and father of eight children, all of whom have something unique in their souls that can only be satisfied by wondering about mathematics.