

Design, Technology, and Research (DTR)

Annual Letter, 2026

Dear members of the DTR family,

It is amazing what continuing to do something brings. This is DTR's 12th year, and the 5th annual letter. As *keeper*, I am proud to share our culture and practice, and my reflections on learning and growing. My job is made easier by your warm responses to my earlier letters, and sustained by the seemingly endless depth there is to discover in what we do.

In this letter, I share how we create space for our students to become. I talk about how we relate to one another. I talk about how we free students to play, discover what they value, and grow. I talk about going on tour, and "coming out" on what DTR is really about. I talk about sea otters. In many ways, this letter is about what it means to be *alive*: as persons and as researchers, as individuals and in relationships. Even by my standards, DTR feels unusually alive at the moment. Everything is so exciting, it scares me.

I am writing this letter during a period in which I am reading D. W. Winnicott, Iris Murdoch, Talbot Brewer, Carl Rogers, and others. There is no doubt that their ideas and language have influenced what follows. They have helped me better understand what we have been living in DTR, and give shape to the experiences I share here. My reader would be kind to finish this letter, and wiser still to move on afterward to their writings.

Celebrating Success

Success in DTR will always center on our students' learning and growth. Even if our sole aim were to produce research outputs (it isn't), prioritizing students makes sense given our long-term view. But our actual aim—to use research as a vehicle for students to come to know themselves and to grow as people—demands that we attend to their *becoming*.

Our focus on becoming has changed my view on what research learning is about, and on what success looks like. In DTR, success isn't just helping someone get into graduate school, or even into a tenure-track faculty position. It's students growing into themselves by learning to take ownership of their goals, to attend to what is genuinely of value, and to

aspire to new possibilities. It's students developing the courage and ability to pursue a life that is fully their own, in which they devote themselves to problems, practices, and relationships that are deeply meaningful to their persons. This is our commitment to our students, and how we are changing the conversation about the value of research experiences and the meaning they can have in students' lives.

Becoming requires fundamental shifts in a person's attitudes and dispositions toward self and learning. It is these shifts—not publications, placements, or accolades—that mark the primary success of our program. Here are a few of the *many* success stories from DTR this year, with pseudonyms chosen alphabetically:¹

- Amy became the main character of her own story by letting go of needing to please others. Rather than trying to be a “good student,” she found the “independent and inquisitive thinker” within her and began to “take charge of my own project more and realize that I can take it whichever direction I want.” She learned to “completely let go of taking criticism too much to heart” and to use feedback to refine her thinking and go deeper into the research. She also became “pretty comfortable (maybe too comfortable) with help-seeking.” While she had always supported others without hesitation, she began to allow others to support her, too.
- Brian loosened his habit of seeing himself as a problem to solve. He came to recognize the destructive cycle of comparing himself to others and overworking to compensate for his perceived lack of ability. He realized that his impulse to fix himself through greater effort and self-control was itself part of this cycle. Rather than trying to dismiss his thoughts and emotions, Brian learned to embrace them as part of his experience and to return his attention to the work of learning itself. As he learned to give himself grace, he began to share his feelings more openly and to recognize more of the good in his work and in himself.
- Caroline found her voice. She had thought of herself as “someone who always keeps her opinions neutral,” when in fact “it's not that I don't have a voice that I want to share, I'm just scared that people wouldn't care even if I do speak up.” In DTR, she realized that “my voice matters, and that people do want to hear it.”

¹ My use of pseudonyms seeks to protect my students' privacy, and, to protect them from judgments from entities (e.g., potential employers) who may see their vulnerable moments during growth as weakness. I wish I lived in a world where my concerns were misplaced (if I live in such a world, tell me, so I can worry less). In the meanwhile, my students are simply amused by my choice of pseudonyms. One of them wishes it to be known that she is no “Carol,” and that she would much rather be a “Caroline.”

Writing her paper, Caroline stopped censoring herself. She let the world know what she had come to perceive, which the rest of us would benefit from seeing as well.

- Daniel learned to confront the limits of his knowing. He realized that “quick, genius solutions and fast-paced iteration doesn't really align with solving difficult problems.” Instead of skirting around the reality of the situation, Daniel began to sit with not knowing. He came to see that “in order to actually work on difficult tasks and make meaningful progress, I should first come to terms with these feelings of not having a clear direction.” He came to accept that real progress takes time, and that he can face his fear of imperfection rather than run away from it.
- Emily found that “everything goes really well when I am not acting out of fear.” Instead of running away, she began to “at least try, and congratulate myself for the act of trying.” She discovered that “it's not that I cannot be scared, I just don't have to let it stop me. Instead, I can just move with it and it will be ok.” As she learned to move with fear, she became more honest with herself and with others. She stopped “bullshitting in an attempt to make it easier,” recognizing instead that “good research requires so much truthfulness with yourself and others.” She openly shared her struggles, advocated for herself, and learned to trust her own judgment. Looking back on the year, Emily reflected: “I feel more myself honestly. The clouds are gradually getting blown away... I feel more grounded and less scared.”
- Faye learned to author her own life. Instead of holding back like Aaron Burr (wait for it...), she stepped into experiences and relationships that transformed her. She found what she values, and carried her values into her research and her life. She began to let go of the idea that growth only counted once she had fully changed. Instead she came to see growth as “acknowledging that I tried really hard” and “being proud of it even without tangible evidence.” She began to “have fun owning the project,” and to “move in directions I wanted to move, even if it sometimes didn't align with expectations.” She realized that “self-directing your learning isn't worth it because you get full credit once you ‘arrive at the right answer.’ It is worth it because there is no ‘right answer,’ and you are writing your own answer.”

These students' transformations are remarkably deep, and I am in awe. What is striking is that the self-critical voices, fears, self-doubt, and not knowing do not just go away. What these students learned was not to eliminate these difficult experiences, but to relate to them with greater self-compassion, and to attend to what they value. Becoming is not

about no longer struggling. It is about learning to hold our struggles differently, so that they no longer determine who we are, what we value, and who we are capable of becoming.

* * *

I want to take a moment to celebrate a remarkable year of accomplishments for our students and alums (yes, we still celebrate accomplishments!). First, three of my former PhD students' dissertation projects were published as papers this year! Huge congrats to Kapil Garg, Gobi Dasu, and Leesha Maliakal Shah for getting their work out. You can find their papers on my website and on theirs. They are brilliant.

In other news, Ryan Louie is starting a tenure-track faculty position at Vanderbilt (go Ryan!). Gobi Dasu is now Dr. Gobi Dasu (go Gobi!). Elara Liu is starting as a PhD student at Emory (go Elara!). Grace Wang is rocking it at Stanford (go Grace!). Students and alums continue to place at top companies and startups that they are excited about. All is well.

Finally, a small update on two of the alums I highlighted in last year's letter. Coming off a dream internship at the Whale and Dolphin Conservation, Katherine Lin got into the field of on-demand fishing to "help reduce the risk of entanglement, one of the main threats to marine life." Kalina Silverman published her first book! *Big Talk: How to Skip the Small Talk, Make Meaningful Connections, and Enrich Your Life*. You can get your copy online, or at your local bookstore.

What a year of becoming.

The Research Project

With all the personal growth that happens in DTR, it is easy to forget that students are here to learn how to do research still, and to work on research projects. What is important to understand, and which took me *years* to understand, is that personal growth and research learning are not two separate benefits of being in DTR. Instead, it is a single, co-occurring phenomenon that unfolds through the research project.

Most of us understand a research project as a systematic investigation that aims to answer a question, solve a problem, or discover new knowledge. This is correct (10 points for Gryffindor!), *and*, in DTR the research project is a vehicle for the self to emerge. This is intentional, and is what seeds our students' personal learning and growth while giving our research its unique character.

In DTR, research mentoring is less about transmitting a preset research agenda than it is about cultivating a protected space in which students can play seriously with ideas, materials, and their own experience. The research project serves as a medium of play: an object through which students externalize intuitions, come into contact with new values, encounter resistance from the world, and gradually discover not only what they are studying but who they are as researchers and as persons. My role is to hold this space: to provide enough structure for exploration to be fruitful, while resisting the temptation to determine anything too early. For the duration of a student's time in DTR, their research project serves as a surface onto which the student *projects* their ideas about themselves and the world, ideas which are continually transformed through their research practice.

The key principle is that for our research projects to be alive, the researcher must be alive. By this, I mean that we must not settle for students acting out of compliance to their own conditioning, or to authority or status (me, or whatever external metric du jour). Instead of following a predetermined direction, we must be patient and allow the student's self to emerge, and to let their first-personal encounter with reality move the research project. This is how our students come to experience who they are as people, and come to see the world and themselves more clearly and kindly, to the benefit of science and person.

Let me walk you through how this works in practice, starting with project selection. When students come into DTR, they are presented with a variety of research projects to choose from that align with my research interest and expertise. The projects are all structured enough and open-ended enough to provide both a starting point and many possible directions in which to take it. The projects are all hard, in that solutions are not obvious and that obvious related work provides little guidance or worse, leads to solutions that "work" but are dead-ends. The problems are all *good*, in that they invite us to become receptive to perspectives through which their goods are made visible. Our apprehension of these goods can sharply influence the questions we ask, and the answers we find.

I am adamant that students choose which project they work on, because my experience and feeling is that project selection in DTR has a Sorting Hat kind of vibe. The research project chooses the student as much as the student chooses it. Students are drawn to projects by interests shaped by their past, and, I suspect, by questions that matter to them more deeply than they yet understand. However conscious or unconscious, if true this sets the stage for a deeply meaningful investigation. Regardless, the act of choosing matters, as

it bonds the student to *their* project. For the many months and year(s) that follow, the student works and reworks the project, and the project works and reworks them.²

We begin the work together. We read papers, learn about the problem, come up with arguments, test our hypotheses, analyze our findings, and iterate. All that research stuff is happening. And, while that's happening, I am attentive to how students project their subjective reality onto how they work on the research, and onto the project surface. This is what I must attend to, for the self to come to play.

Especially at the start, many students do not feel comfortable bringing their subjectivity into the research project. They want me to tell them what's right, and they want to do what I will judge to be correct. They want to be "effective," and to do whatever is needed to progress their project to some standard worthy of their (project's) and their (person's) acceptance by authority figures. So they hold back who they are, try to please me, and *perform*. This I draw attention to, while trying to reset the personal, environmental, and relational conditions that may be creating this compulsion. One way or another, we need the self to come to play.

When students eventually arrive, they are confronted with reality. This happens as their ideas and ways of seeing the problem and solution are challenged by:

- our way of working in DTR, for example through assessing the validity of arguments and the importance of certain risks.
- me, for example by my questioning their understanding or demonstrating how their ideas lose sight of certain principles and goods we hold as valuable. I also draw attention to certain patterns of thought and working that I observe, and how they may be distorting students' views of the problem and solution space, and of their selves. The point is not that I am always right (ahem), but that I am an *other* person who is independent of their subjective field.
- experimentation, for example by working out an actual example, building an actual prototype that embodies an idea, or actually testing the idea in a realistic context.

In these and other ways, reality pushes back. Students come to know the limits of their subjectivity, and how their ideas about themselves and the world are not serving their research project. While this may feel threatening to the student's sense of self, when we

² In almost all cases, students work on the projects they choose for the entire duration of their time in DTR. Students are technically allowed to switch projects, but this is discouraged and happens infrequently.

persist in our insistence on the student's subjectivity *and* reality, there often comes a loosening of self-conception through which play and creativity is possible.³ The student brings something real of themselves into the research project, and their encounter with reality, in turn, educates their *attention*.⁴ They begin to perceive possibilities, values, and questions that had been obscured by fear, performance, or habit. What they find in the research and in themselves is novel and ancient: it surprises them, and was there all along.

In summary, what's most exciting about research projects in DTR is when students continually bring themselves into the research while staying receptive to reality. What emerges as *their research project* is something that is uniquely theirs and that is firmly reality tested. As they come to play, I too join in by bringing my own subjectivity into the play space. It is in this way that research projects in DTR become meaningful, and that we find through them something that we couldn't have come to know, had we lacked the patience for our selves to emerge.

* * *

Let me give you an example. Daisy (pseudonym) joined DTR and chose what looked like any other project. She was working on an interactive system, and was making progress implementing and extending ideas that I had seeded. While she and I had both brought up some technical challenges, it became clear that the real obstacle was not technical. She later reflected: "I know that I want the interface to make users curious, but I wasn't even curious about the questions I was investigating. So I kept doing stuff just for the sake of producing some progress, even though I had no idea where I'm going towards."

Like many students, Daisy had learned to equate research with producing visible progress. Rather than dwelling with a question, she would ask what feature to build. Rather than asking what mattered, she would ask what looked like "real CS" so "I can have some results and eventually publish a paper or something." The research project became a vehicle for seeking approval. In this state, Daisy's own person remained largely absent. Of course, she was not excited by her project.

This I objected to, so I asked her to attend to her own experience. One week, I told her to connect with a story that makes her feel something, in her *bones*. In another week, I asked her to have fun instead of being productive. All the while, I repeated: "What the hell are

³ Exactly as I understand Winnicott to mean by play and creativity in his book *Playing and Reality*.

⁴ "Attention" is used here in the Murdochian sense of learning to see more clearly and truly. See Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*.

you doing to yourself?” After many weeks of back-and-forth, Daisy started to “let myself feel things and be moved by things and get in touch with the artsy and creative person in me and let that guide my research.” She began “embracing the parts of myself that I think are not valuable to society: the chaotic, random, sentimental, and creative parts of me.”

As Daisy gave herself permission to attend to what genuinely moved her, she began to perceive possibilities in the research that had previously remained obscured. Then, instead of hiding behind abstract language, she increasingly worked through concrete examples and representations such as storyboards. She began to implement her ideas in tangible form, even when she doubted that they would work. She became more willing to see how her anxiety was blocking her work. Above all, she began to recognize and *live* the many parts of herself that she had learned to dismiss, and to test them against reality.

She later wrote: “I started thinking wait this is not computer science, this is not helping with my future, why am I doing this!! But I have always thought of DTR as a space where I feel like I am actually doing something meaningful, that I am actually thinking and I can be proud of myself and my work. So what and who defined meaningful? If completing that CS worksheet makes me feel sad and empty inside, then why do I perceive that as meaningful? Who said computer science research shouldn’t be beautiful and moving?”

From the outside, one could say that Daisy was working to refine her research question, develop a stronger design argument, and produce a better system. All this is true, but this description misses completely what was happening in Daisy’s person, and in her research project. The research project was no longer a performance, but something she inhabited. As she became more alive to the questions that genuinely mattered to her, the project also became more alive. The project became both a vehicle for Daisy to discover something of value in herself and for her to contribute it to the world. The research learning and the personal growth are expressions of the same process. This is the research project.

* * *

Some readers (and I) may wonder if this way of working is simply too risky. What if nothing meaningful emerges? What if the student never finds their way? What about productivity? What about the papers we promised each other? What about my career? Having lived through these questions for years now, I have a few comments to share.

First, in DTR we continue to pride ourselves on being rigorous and effective. The whole time we are working hard to become more skillful researchers. We learn how to make good arguments, build prototypes, run studies, critique ideas, iterate effectively, and

discover why our ideas fail. I still care deeply about good science, good engineering, and good scholarship. The difference is that I no longer believe these skills are sufficient. The researcher must also remain alive for the research to remain alive.

Second, what has changed most is not how we work, but what I have come to trust. Early in my career, I often felt responsible for determining where every project should end up. Increasingly I find this view misguided. The more impatient we are for outcomes, the more likely we are to converge on work that is technically competent but conceptually and spiritually empty. Moreover, even when I see certain goods in a project, students cannot simply inherit my vision of them. They must come to recognize these goods for themselves through their honest and humble encounter with reality. Otherwise, the project may produce something publishable, but through vapid answers to vapid questions.

Instead, I learned to trust emergence, because reality has more to teach us than we already know. When I am patient enough to let my students bring themselves into genuine contact with the problem, while remaining disciplined in how they investigate it, something better often appears than either of us could have designed in advance. The work becomes more interesting, because the researcher is emerging through the research project.

Of course, this is not without risk. Projects can take longer than we would like. Some wander further than is comfortable for me and the student. There are moments when I wonder if I should just tell the student what to do and move on. But increasingly, I don't...

Third, our students continue to place well, and I am doing okay, too. Perhaps tenure has made it easier for me to work this way. It has given me the freedom to care more deeply about bringing my students' persons into our research. Increasingly, I attract students who want this for themselves, too. I recognize this is a privilege, and I do not take it lightly.

Finally, and perhaps most honestly, I simply could not ignore the difficult questions that my encounters with students continually presented me with. If I am not trying to cultivate researchers who are more alive, more truthful, and more capable of encountering themselves and reality through their work, then what exactly am I doing? And if we already know where our research project is going before we have genuinely encountered it, then what are we hoping to discover? In DTR, our way of approaching the research project contributes both to deeper discoveries and a more alive human being. I have yet to find a more worthwhile way to spend my career, as researcher and mentor. Until I do, this is our research project in DTR.

Hello, Self

One of my main jobs in DTR is to facilitate students meeting themselves. I don't mean the people they think or fear they are. I mean the people they didn't know they are. For instance (pseudonyms again):

- George, who has a "habit of trying to get everything perfect the first time," met George, who kept putting himself and his ideas out there.
- Helen, who was terrified to conduct her study, met Helen, who found that "it is a lot easier than I thought."
- Isabel and Jack, who are not creative (their words not mine), met Isabel and Jack, who came up with 200 game ideas in a single week.
- Kim, who saw every "mistake" as a personal flaw to fix, met Kim, who accepted "that's just how it is and I don't need to be so hard on myself."
- Lauren, who follows her impulses and struggles alone, met Lauren, who plays through her research and gets in contact with others.
- Maria, who subscribes to reason, met Maria, who couldn't stop laughing and smiling after I started playing music all of a sudden during a group coaching session, and kept increasing the volume as I listened to my students.

Meeting ourselves is a strange experience. The selves we meet are often not the ones we could've imagined as our selves. Often, the self we meet is doing something that we find so uncomfortable and out of reach—that's so not *me*, as it were—that the experience can be disorienting. Other times, the thing we made such a big deal about that we thought would be so impossible for us was so possible (when we eventually got around to doing it), that we can't help but wonder "oh, is that it?" Other times, it's a delight. Whichever way, we surprise ourselves, and are surprised by who we are now.

This movement *between selves* is the movement of becoming. It doesn't matter if we are scared or not, timid or not. It doesn't matter how long we take. What matters is that we hold onto the belief that there may be a self waiting to be met. We stay patient. When we are ready (or simply, commit), we leave our feet and see who we may find when we land on the other side.

What *is* important is that we recognize and celebrate the self we find on the other side. In DTR, We Are the Champions by Queen is the official anthem for such occasions. Yes, out loud, and together please, so I am not singing by myself.

Much of what I know about moving between selves, I learned from parkour. Parkour is not just physical movement; it's expanding into possibilities that exceed our self-understanding and perceived capabilities.⁵ These days when I coach students to do research, I adopt many of the same principles that my parkour teacher Kurt Gowan applies to coaching me: (a) set goals that the student thinks are impossible, but that the coach believes are possible for that student; (b) be present and patient; (c) facilitate trying, but not helping too much; (d) demonstrate possibility, but trust the student to break their own jump; (e) play, and keep the game; and (f) hold space for any stories, beliefs, and emotions that may arise (sorry Kurt, your ears must be ringing still. Appreciate you for listening).

More than any technique or thing I learned from parkour when I was healthy, what I bring to my students is the self that I met during my year-long injury. I had badly injured one of my ankles (I will spare you the details, but know that my other foot went *through* the wall, and was thus fine). I met with Kurt the following week, and after showing me a few rehab exercises, he asked me to try getting over this bar. Terrified, I moved gingerly and awkwardly. It wasn't pretty, but I made it. For the next year, we worked on one awkward challenge after another, all the time challenging my ideas about what I could not do.

It was during this time that I came to see how my capacity for becoming is limited by my mind far more than by my actual abilities. As long as I am willing to move, what I do doesn't have to be pretty or amazing, and it can still bring me to meet the many selves that are waiting for me. It is this understanding that I bring to my students in DTR, and that they come to experience for themselves.

Sea Otters

DTR is an intense experience. There is so much happening in our research, our persons, and our community that it helps to anchor ourselves to an intention that we can return to throughout our journey. Last year, I set the intention of learning to accept ourselves. "You do not have to be good," Mary Oliver wrote, "You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves." For me and many of my students, this was just the reminder we needed.

⁵ See Kurt Gowan's description of Art du Déplacement: <https://www.parkourways.com/history>

This year, I wondered if self-acceptance was enough for me. I can accept myself (and this is essential), but what I really want is to be *alive*. To be clear, I am not looking for “the thrill of fucking victory” (Joey Knish, *Rounders*) or to put myself on another hamster wheel of success. What I am looking for, like so many of us, is freedom.

Fall quarter, I invited my students to free their mind. I shared this excerpt of Jiddu Krishnamurti’s speech “To Be a True Human Being,” from the book *Total Freedom*:

What we call happiness or ecstasy is, to me, creative thinking. And creative thinking is the infinite movement of thought, emotion, and action. So long as thought, emotion, and action are circumscribed, held by a fixed idea, or merely adjusts itself to a background or condition and, therefore, becomes limited, such thought is not creative.

When there is this creative thinking, which is infinite movement, then there can be no idea of a limitation [or] conflict.

My students and I found the quote challenging, as what was being implicated by our conditioned movements was not only our freedom, but our creativity and happiness as well. We thought about the ideas we held as fixed, that got in the way of our research and our lives. In a talk I gave on DTR that quarter, I shared how when we fear that we are not good, it’s easy to slip into a production-oriented mindset, as a way to prove our worth. Our fear of imperfection can lead us to run away from what’s actually important, and our fear of not knowing can lead us to grasp at existing ways of doing things rather than to explore new ways. Seeing this helped some of my students become “more aware of the reason why certain things are just difficult to do,” and to “actually begin to try to do them.”

As the quarter went on, I increasingly felt that we cannot unbind ourselves from our ideas by force, nor achieve freedom by getting rid of the parts of ourselves we dislike. I carried this thought with me into winter break, during which I had the good fortune of observing hundreds of sea otters in the wild in Monterey Bay, California, and learning about their role in the ecosystem at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. Seeing them, I began to understand what it might mean to become *whole*. In winter quarter I shared this portrayal of sea otters from Stephen Palumbi and Carolyn Sotka’s book, *The Death and Life of Monterey Bay*:

Otters eat a lot. A sea otter has a metabolic rate about three times that of a similarly sized dog and will consume one-quarter to one-third of its body mass each day—15 to 20 pounds for a 60-pound animal. Young males form foraging parties, exploring the edges of their territories. These gangs can

move into a new kelp neighborhood overnight, pounding down the local shellfish.

Early otter watchers realized that these quick, charming animals moved like a plague of locusts across the landscape, depleting resources and then moving on. [While it's easy to see otters as destructive], where they arrived there was once subtidal rock bristling with urchin spines—now bloomed kelp forests, with sea urchins and abalone restricted to crevices. Where kelp thrived, so did fish and invertebrates. And where these communities churned, the next layer of sea life returned: seals, sea lions, and seabirds.

Sea otters teach us that wholeness is not the absence of destruction. It's about embracing all the parts of the ecosystem, and every part of ourselves. Just as the otters are essential for the health of the bay, the parts of ourselves we resist—fear, anger, violence, imperfection—are essential for our wholeness. What happens when we allow ourselves to be whole? How does that affect us as researchers, and as people?

For some of my students, embracing their whole person was *the* key to becoming free. As they began to integrate all the parts of themselves that they had hidden away, they were surprised to find the infinite movement, creativity, and happiness that Krishnamurti spoke of. One student wrote: “self-directing doesn't necessarily mean I fix all the problems because some problems are meant to be there and are a part of me (#sea otter) and it's okay to sit with it.”

When we allow all of ourselves to be seen, we stop spending so much energy defending ourselves and can instead come out to *play*. And play, I believe, is foundational to our being alive, and to our freedom (and creativity, and happiness). In spring, I invited my students to play and to keep the game. I shared this quote by C. Thi Nguyen, from his insightful book, *Games: Agency as Art*:

Our values, in ordinary life, are largely recalcitrant. Much of what we value seems universal and immovable. But game activity is different. We can adopt new ends, which will guide our actions for the duration of the game, and then drop them in an instant. When we play games, we take on temporary agencies—temporary sets of abilities and constraints, along with temporary ends. [In games,] we have a significant capacity for agential fluidity.

Nguyen reminds us that we discover through play that our selves are not rigid. When we play, we stop clinging to a single identity and become someone who can try on new ways of being. I encouraged my students to experiment with new ways of approaching their research and themselves. I reminded them that our attempts don't have to be so final in marking who we are, and that we can respawn. We also played theatre games each week to start the studio (thanks to our resident theatre expert, Ilya Solovjov), which helped us loosen up and remember that it is not so serious. This helped my students find the courage to try, and to enjoy their failed attempts and successes.

While fun and thrilling, Gabrielle Zevin reminds us that to play is no small feat. In *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, she writes:

To allow yourself to play with another person is no small risk. It means allowing yourself to be open, to be exposed, to be hurt. It is the human equivalent of the dog rolling on its back—I know you won't hurt me, even though you can. It is the dog putting its mouth around your hand and never biting down. To play requires trust and love.

I forget sometimes just how much I ask of my students, and how open they are to playing with me and with one another. During my talk at Northwestern's learning sciences brown bag, a faculty member asked me how I think about how DTR disrupts my students' lives. Somewhat dumbstruck, I must have said that it is worth it, that we feel alive, and that I try to be as honest as I can with students about what it is that we do. Reflecting back, what I wish I said is that I can never take for granted the trust and love that my students have for me, and for our community. To play is a really big deal, and I am honored that my students have chosen to embark on our shared journey to be alive.

Keepers

Since its inception, DTR students have run DTR alongside me. They lead the interview committee. They lead open house and outreach. They lead social events and hackathons. They lead the design of our physical space, and of our digital presence and tools. They connect us to our alumni.

In many ways I can no longer run DTR by myself, so I am grateful for all the help. But committees exist for a deeper reason. They teach our students not only to take responsibility for their research projects, but for the community we are building together. Like everything else in DTR, this needs to be lived.

When I say my students lead these committees, I mean that they *own* it. Committee heads are the stewards of our communal life. They inherit something from previous students, care for it, and leave it better than they found it. If DTR is a garden, then each generation of students has served as its gardeners, whose care has shaped its renewal and becoming.

Committee heads are directly responsible for the health of our community. There are real consequences. If students don't organize interviews, interviews don't happen, and we won't have a new cohort next quarter. If we don't do social events, our community weakens. For better or worse, we all live the consequences of how we care for DTR.

This year, our committees did *many* spectacular things. Here are some highlights:

- The outreach heads transformed our social media presence and how we run open house. The interviewing heads organized a record number of interviews. Together we held many thoughtful discussions about recruiting, including how we'd like to communicate who we are to prospective students.
- The social heads organized a movie night, ice skating, a trip to the aquarium, lawn games, and an outing to go rock climbing together. Our hackathon heads led us to make beautiful paper flowers, fridge magnets, and rock personalities.
- The space heads created the DTR library! All the books our quarterly quotes come from are on the shelf, with bookmarks of quotes from each quarter. There are more drawings on whiteboards, more photos on walls, and a tighter physical community.
- The web heads revamped our website and rebuilt the pair research platform from scratch. You can better navigate our projects, find our alumni, and smash that subscribe button for future annual letters.
- The onboarding heads rewrote our on-boarding guides. They are awesome now (i.e., you can actually understand them!). They also rethought how we welcome students into DTR, and into becoming.
- The alumni heads mapped out where all our alums are, organized an alumni-led AI prototyping workshop, and are working to set up the DTR alumni association.

All of this takes an extraordinary amount of effort and thoughtfulness, and I am incredibly grateful for all that our students do to maintain *our community*. DTR is not just me. It's us, and it will always be us. I may be DTR's keeper, but I am never its only keeper. This is how our community continues to thrive.

Coming Out

Part of my job as an academic is to give talks at other schools. I haven't been on a major talk tour since 2018, and with all the wonderful work my students have done since then, I wanted to hit the road again. I ended up visiting 10 schools across the country in the last year, with most of my visits coming during an intensive three-month tour over the winter.⁶

I had a brilliant trip. My talks were well received. My hosts were warm and hospitable. The conversations with students and faculty were stimulating and engaging. It was everything I hoped for, and more.

Above all, I will remember this tour for my “coming out” on DTR, and as an academic. While most who know my work are hardly surprised to hear that I care about students' learning and growth, few know the extent of the journey we invite students on, and just how much of ourselves we allow to be seen, held, and challenged. I feared that my colleagues would not understand, would not approve. How could it be that producing research is not our main focus in DTR? What do I mean that we use research as a vehicle for students to learn about themselves, and to grow as people?

Determined to say who I am and who we are, my talk shared this quote from a student:

Until DTR, I had no awareness of how I was tormenting myself or how closed off I was from the world. I came in needing desperately to prove myself, telling myself that I NEEDED to get somewhere. It never occurred to me that a gentler approach was even possible, let alone effective. You taught me to pay attention and helped me become more perceptive of the wonderful world around me. Thank you for giving me the tools to become more self-aware and be able to reflect more meaningfully on what it means to be true to myself.

My audience was beyond receptive. My colleagues encouraged me to say more, and to make bolder claims still. They thought with me about how we can bring learning environments like DTR to more of the university. They shared their own efforts, and how they are caring for their community. Students shared personal stories of feeling lost, and of finding the courage to do what they find meaningful. The conversations were full of warmth and human goodness, with so many of us wondering how to bring about a world that we would be proud to inhabit and to nurture.

⁶ You can find my talks at <https://eecs.northwestern.edu/~hq/talk.html>

I am embarrassed to say that even with the warm reception, coming out was not easy. While I knew that it would be fine, evenings before talks the old narrator returns to tell me that “no one cares about you and what you do. You are all alone in this world, and that’s your life.” My brain, incapable of proper Bayesian updating (or, super strong prior), at times succeeded in coaxing one more practice talk out of me. But on a walk in Palo Alto during my Stanford visit, I had the visceral experience of *knowing* that I am not alone, and never have been. In that moment, I learned in my body the truth that I had been unable to hold for much of my life. Now that my body knows, I don’t expect to forget any time soon.

* * *

There is so much more I can say of my tour, but in the interest of brevity I will share just three things. First, it was hard on my students for me to be gone so much, and I am sorry. I am grateful for my students who kept the community strong, and for our friends and family who led studio on the Fridays I missed. My travels were disruptive still, but I know, if it were not for you, the disruption would have been far worse. Thank you.

Second, I had the great pleasure of reconnecting with many of our alums. In the Bay Area in particular, we held a dinner party overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge, and then another at Stanford. We had alums who were just in DTR a year ago, and others who were in DTR near its start. Claiming no credit, I couldn’t fathom how they were all growing up so well, and how, despite all of my getting in their face about the risks in their projects and the flaws in their arguments, they chose to remember the best of me and our community. Others were braver still for letting me know of my misconceptions and what I’d missed, for which I am beyond grateful that our relationship allowed.

Finally, I got to visit my alma mater, and to spend time with my mentors at Harvard and MIT. At Harvard, my PhD advisor David Parkes introduced me at my talk, honored my work with thoughtful questions and comments, and hosted a lovely dinner with mentors, collaborators, old friends, and new friends. No different than when we first met 20 years ago, he was kind, loving, generous, curious, and grounded. As always, I felt welcomed.

Yiling Chen—who had she not intervened in the 2nd year of my PhD I would most certainly not be a professor today—shared with me how she continues to keep the spirit of play in her mentoring. I remembered a time long ago when she was stuck in an airport with me, and we were talking over a proof in a paper that as I recall, had already been accepted. I realized again how lucky I had been to have a mentor who loves science, and who every day brings the joy of discovery with her to her students.

Rob Miller had breakfast with me on the day of my MIT visit, just as he had done every week during my postdoc. We talked about the state of the university in the age of AI, and how we can continue to prepare our students for the future. His seriousness about education, and about the challenges we as educators must confront in a rapidly changing world, gives me hope knowing that at least some of us are willing to face reality head on.

People become through relationships, and I am no different. Whatever is good in DTR did not begin with me. It is a continuation of an *economy of life* in which goods and values are lived across generations.⁷ These vignettes show where my values come from, and the people who taught me how to care and play. If you have benefitted from DTR, thank David, Yiling, and Rob.

Holding Space

If people become through relationships, just what kind of relationship makes becoming possible?

This question is central to DTR, because so much of what our students learn must first be lived. Our practice is demanding and unnatural. I ask students to think about what they are avoiding. To reveal confusion instead of performing competence. To move toward uncertainty rather than away from it. To celebrate failure rather than avoid it. To seek help when they are most embarrassed by not knowing. Before students have experienced these ways of being, they feel inefficient, uncomfortable, or even absurd. They do not see the value of these practices, and why should they? Students cannot value what they cannot yet perceive, and they cannot perceive without acting first.

This presents a real challenge for learning. When students are worried about looking foolish, disappointing me, or proving themselves, they naturally retreat to what feels safe. They protect themselves rather than try something new. Yet trying something new is what allows new values to become visible. I can problematize their stance, but confrontation can easily feel like judgment, and students may quite reasonably retreat further.

Before students can become receptive to new practices and values, they need to know that it is okay not to understand them. That it is okay that it is hard. That it is okay not to get it on the first try or the tenth. That it is okay to feel anxious, confused, frustrated, or

⁷ After Talbot Brewer. See "An Economy of Life." *Raritan* 41.4, Spring 2022.

embarrassed. Whatever students experience, they need to know that it is okay, and that none of it threatens their belonging in our community, or my caring for them as people.

Increasingly, I have come to see my work as *holding space for becoming*. Holding space creates the relational conditions under which students become receptive to new ways of being whose value they cannot yet perceive. By holding space, I do not simply mean creating a space that is safe, supportive, and affirming, though this is the foundation. What I mean is a loving kind of stereoscopic vision that sees students simultaneously for who they are right now, and for who they are capable of becoming.⁸ When I only see students' potential, I become impatient and frustrated with who they are today. If I stop at affirming who they are, we risk accepting every fear, habit, and limiting story as fixed. Students need acceptance and challenge. Since I challenge naturally, I am working on accepting more.

I begin by holding *unconditional positive regard* for my students, letting them know that I am on their side.⁹ I communicate, as clearly as I can: I see you. I like you. I love you, even. It's okay to feel what you feel. It's okay to not know. It's okay to fail. I am not here to shame you for being anxious, perfectionistic, avoidant, angry, or uncertain. These are human responses, and they are welcome. You do not have to earn my care. You belong. I do this not as a technique, but as how I have come to see and attend to my students.

Once, a student became genuinely upset with something I said. Rather than trying to convince her to be less upset, I told her to kick my door on her way out. She did, and I cheered her on (Yes! Yes!!). The point is not to kick a door, but to know that our relationship survives her anger. She can be angry with me and know that I am still right here, committed to her learning and growth. Another student believed that his anxiety was the problem, and that if he could simply stop feeling anxious, everything else would fall into place. I told him that it's okay to be anxious. We can learn to move with the anxiety, rather than hope that it disappears.

But validating experiences is only the first step. DTR is not simply a place to feel seen; it is a place to become. If all I did was assure students that their feelings are valid, we would be wasting the very relationships we are building. Holding space is not simply about making students comfortable; it's about helping them be receptive to new ways of being whose value can only be discovered through living them. What students need is for us to

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ See Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person*.

remain in relationship with them as they are challenged to be open to experiences that feel uncomfortable, and to stay with them until unfamiliar practices reveal their value.

When students *know* that it is safe, we can start to look at what is getting in the way of their becoming. We can now problematize, and this is where my essay on “Interruption, Discord, and Drama” from last year’s annual letter fits into the picture. Holding space allows confrontation with me and with reality to be received as care rather than judgment. When students know that my regard for them is not in question, they can begin examining the habits, assumptions, and stories that no longer serve them, and begin playing with new ways of being. Whether things work out as expected or not, they know that they are okay, and that I am still right here.

I am not the only one holding space; the students are also holding space for one another. One studio, I had (jokingly!) called out a pair of students for being loud. One of the students got really embarrassed and hid her face behind her hands. Not missing a beat, another student said: “oh why, being loud is a good quality and I admire you so much for speaking up. I genuinely wish I could be more like you.” In another occasion, a student shared how she too had been performative in DTR (for a whole month!), and that when she realized that she didn’t have to do that, she just, stopped. Not believing her ears, the other student said: “So you are saying it’s okay to just admit that I don’t know something, and to move on?” The whole studio looked at her kindly, letting her know that yes, you are alright. In moments like this, my students held the space much better than I did or could.

* * *

The idea of holding space came alive in the Human Learning SIG. In DTR, a SIG (Special Interest Group) is a small group of students organized around a particular research interest. We meet weekly, during which students receive coaching from me and support from one another as they learn to lead their research projects. This year I had Jay Jeon, Nicole Lu, Henry Lee, Jessica Sun, and Sarah Carley in our SIG. They are all incredible people, and if you ever find the opportunity to work with any of them, consider yourself very lucky.

Here is how our meetings go. We laugh *a lot*. There are Gen Z jokes, terrible puns, playful teasing, and enough silliness that an outside observer might wonder whether we get any work done at all. Yet within the same hour, someone might talk about a difficult feeling, or what they are avoiding in their project work. Then, a few minutes later, we are laughing again. A single SIG meeting can have an incredible dynamic range. We can spend twenty minutes intensely problematizing a way of working, and then immediately laugh together

again. The laughter communicated that we were examining a particular pattern, and never evaluating a person's worth. The relationship remains intact, and the vibe is still cool.

Instead of being performative, students brought in unfinished work and invited critique. Instead of only bringing in project issues that were easier to resolve, they brought in the real difficulties they were facing. Students would say they were lost and ask questions rather than pretend. We talked about their burnout, fears, and concerns. It was all okay to share, and nobody judged. The SIG held the space, and we kept learning.

Students tried practices they had avoided. As they immersed themselves in them, they discovered values they could not previously perceive. What used to be difficult learning became seen as fun, rewarding, and self-expanding, setting up a virtuous cycle in which the students can continue to see themselves and their research differently. Over time, many discovered new possibilities for how they can lead their research, and their lives.

It is important to emphasize that it was not just me, but we, who held space for one another. We were all listening intently, and maintaining the space in which each person could share vulnerable parts of themselves. We trusted that none of us would judge. On each of the two project teams, project partners listened to one another more, pushed back on one another more, and supported one another more. On one team, one partner would ask the other to share two things they were proud of after each meeting, while the other would call in patterns their partner was working to resolve whenever they occurred. On the other team, partners would journal together about how their beliefs and emotions were affecting their learning. As the SIG members came to see one another as the ones they trusted to hold space for them, the students got even closer. They supported one another inside and outside the context of the research, and inside and outside of SIG meetings.

My relationship with the students changed as well. Within the SIG, my reputation as a harsh and scary mentor never materialized, and I am okay with it. It's not that I am no longer interrupting, creating discord, or drama, but that students no longer feel as threatened by my direct questioning. They know that they can push back too. They can say things like: "that's not helpful," or "I am confused by what you're asking me to do," or "I am upset at you," and know that there will be no repercussions.

I became really close to the students. Rubbing salt in my wound, at the end of the year they got me a card that read, "Our Heart Breaks for Your Loss." In our last SIG together, we held a closing circle to share what the SIG meant to each of us and how we came to be. We tried our best to find closure, though many of us still find it hard to let go.

The Human Learning SIG became one of the most extraordinary learning environments I have ever been a part of. These students taught me how fun, rewarding, and self-expanding learning can be when we hold space for one another. The students broke so many jumps, found so many valuable practices, and became so capable of inhabiting new ways of being. They are amazing people today, and their potential feels limitless.

* * *

Holding space creates the conditions for play. When students know they are safe to experiment, failed attempts no longer become judgments of who they are. Through play, new values become visible, and new possibilities emerge. This is the kind of relationship through which people become, and what I am working to make commonplace in DTR.

HCI Studio 2.0

Last year I wrote about “HCI Studio,” a new course that I designed to teach HCI and design *practice*. I emphasized the difference between process and practice. Practices challenge students’ patterns and beliefs, requiring them to work with themselves and to break jumps. This I knew, but what I didn’t appreciate was how important holding space is. This is where we made the biggest change this year, and the results are staggering.

We held a space in which there is no punishment for failing, *ever*. We let students know that “getting it” on week 9 is a huge win, not a failure. We made sure that every major shift in worldview or action was celebrated, and shared with the group.

We expanded our use of circle time. Every studio (twice a week) we sat in a circle and talked to one another for 40 minutes. We learned each other’s names. We talked about what we were learning, what we were experiencing, how we felt, and its significance to us. We talked about core HCI practices and concepts, but also, about ourselves. A lot of learning happened in this circle, because this is where we held space for one another. Over time, students shared more and more vulnerable moments. We applauded in equal parts trying, failing, and triumphing. We constructed our own language for valuable ways of practicing: cheat harder, get into the bedroom, hair in the game, leave the table. My TA Aidan Fitzsimons and I held unconditional positive regard for the students, *and* were firm on the core values of the course and challenged our students directly.

We created a maximally supportive space for *trying* to practice. Students’ “shameful acts” and self-perceived failures were welcomed, and normalized as part of the learning

process. While many students were skeptical at the start, they experienced, over and over, how they or someone else would be accepted for something that didn't go well in their practice. This created the confidence for students to *actually* try, and to finally do the real things that are so hard to do: to think about what they are avoiding in their design work, to test in realistic scenarios that break their ideas, and to do meaningfully imperfect things.

This version of HCI Studio inverted all of the students' assumptions about college. It's not a place to perform. It's not competitive. The professor and TA care and see everything they are doing. They don't get away with stuff, but not knowing and failing are somehow okay. No one is out to get them, and no mistakes are punished. There is no reward for producing a shiny product, and the class is actually about learning, and unlearning.

Needless to say, a lot of learning happened in HCI Studio this year. I will share just two stories. During the "midterm," Alice (pseudonym) didn't know most people's names (that's the "midterm"). While others were going around asking people what their names were, she wouldn't leave the table. She also struggled to see herself as a designer, saying to me that "I don't create nothing." But by week 8, something had shifted in a big way. She came into the studio, and shared with all of us that she and her team had finally done a realistic user test. One of her teammates tried to interrupt her, but she was firm on wanting to celebrate the win. I played *We Are The Champions*, and we all cheered. Both her and her teammate remember this moment as the turning point in how they saw themselves as designers, and as people who *practice*.

In our closing circle, Brianna (pseudonym) shared: "Do you know that meme where it's like 'when you have a healthy relationship and realize you're the toxic one?' That's how I feel about this class." She shared that since childhood, she's been trying to be "good"—whether that's with her family, at school, or in industry. This class helped her see that she can be true to her experience: to be proud of her learning through failure, to not have to be impressive, and to feel what she feels. She doesn't know if her employer will accept her being like this, but she is glad that she found our space prior to graduating.

This year taught me that teaching practice is inseparable from holding space. Students do not simply need opportunities to practice, or coaching on how to practice better. They need relationships that make practice possible. Once such conditions exist, students become willing to attempt the very things that learning a practice requires: trying imperfectly but wholeheartedly, and remaining present through frustration and failure.

Once we centered holding space, both DTR and HCI Studio changed for the better.

Direct Contact

For many years, DTR's planning model centered on learning to (1) represent your existing understanding, (2) diagnose risks, (3) focus plans on addressing key risks, and (4) produce deliverables that demonstrate new understanding (see "How We Coach and Teach Design Research" in the 2022 annual letter). This year we made two important additions.

The first is *research vision*. Students can become so absorbed in the next sprint that they lose sight of the larger transformation their project is trying to bring about. They know what they are doing this week, but forget why it matters. To address this, we introduced regular vision talks, in which students articulate the world as it is today, the world they hope to create, and the conceptual pathway between them. This helped students to situate their sprints within an evolving theory of change.

The second is making *direct contact*. Again and again, students knew what they should do next, yet somehow continued to avoid the very experience that would teach them what they needed to understand. Somewhere between intention and action, they found ways to stay one step removed from reality. Rather than experiencing it themselves, they read more articles. Rather than using their prototype, they refined their ideas. Rather than going deep during user interviews, they asked only surface-level questions. Rather than confronting what they were avoiding, they kept working on something adjacent.

Over time, we found ourselves returning to the phrase: **make direct contact**. If the unknown concerns users, talk to users. If it concerns an experience, have the experience. If it concerns a prototype, build the prototype. If it concerns an argument, work through an actual example. If it concerns yourself, look honestly at what you are avoiding. Every sprint should create the conditions for encountering reality as directly as possible.

This simple phrase transformed how students approached their work. Rather than asking, "What should I do this week?" students began asking, "What's blocking me from making direct contact?" Students began to see that when a sprint goes poorly, they often lost sight of the larger vision or substituted indirect work for direct encounter. As they investigated this, they recognized how they protected themselves from precisely the experience their research required.

The planning model became more than a way of organizing work. It became a way for students to continually reorient themselves toward the two things that matter most: the

world they hope to create and the world as it actually is. Each sprint became an opportunity to clarify their vision and make direct contact with reality.

Holding space makes direct contact possible. It creates the conditions under which students can meet their projects honestly, without needing to hide from what their projects require. By holding onto a meaningful research vision and making direct contact, students allow both their understanding and their selves to be transformed by the encounter.

Once Seen

When DTR students realize just how capable they are of becoming, they come to see how expansive their lives can be. Week after week, they find themselves and their peers seeing and acting in ways they did not think possible just a few weeks before. They also see me crafting a life of my own. All of this changes how they see their lives. Possibilities are no longer hypothetical. They see new paths they could not imagine before. They begin to want a life that is more meaningful and felt, and less NPC.

Clearly, I value living a self-directed life through continual becoming. I also value its nuances: how an education in becoming simultaneously expands one's sense of possibility *and* teaches one to attend to what is genuinely valuable. The world opens, yet one's attention becomes more focused. One becomes freer, and at the same time more *called* toward particular ways of living. This I cherish.

Still, learning to become is, in an important sense, *irreversible*. Once students genuinely see what they are capable of, they cannot easily unsee it. The assumptions they held about themselves no longer appear fixed. More than this, they discover a different way of being in the world: awake, playful, self-authored, meaningful, and alive. They discover that this life is not reserved for a few exceptional people. It is available to them. For some students, DTR is where they first come to see this.

For me, this is what makes learning to become ethically serious. I try to be as explicit as I can be about what DTR is, but there is no way to fully communicate what students are getting into before they experience it themselves. In this sense, joining DTR is a bit like taking the red pill in *The Matrix*. Students can never again inhabit their lives with quite the same innocence. In L. A. Paul's terms, DTR is a transformative experience. Once we transform, we cannot go back.

But when I talk to others about this, no one seems particularly bothered. They point out my delusions of grandeur: DTR is just one part of my students' lives, and I don't possess some omnipotent power to change what they value. They remind me that helping students see themselves more fully and the world more clearly is hardly something to apologize for. Besides, my students remain free to discover what they value and to pursue the lives they wish to live. Of course, they are right about all this.

Still, I feel uneasy knowing that there is no way to invite someone into becoming without also initiating them into it. Students can pursue whatever lives they choose, but they cannot choose not to have seen what they have seen. While my conviction about what we do in DTR is deeper than it's ever been, so too is my appreciation for the responsibility I have taken on. This is what I am called to do, and I will do it with my eyes wide open.

Kids

I don't have kids of my own, and may never.¹⁰ It's a bit sad, because I imagine I would enjoy being a dad. Instead of dwelling on that, I have been overcompensating for over a decade now by dedicating a great many of my waking hours to my students. This strange act has led to almost 200 "kids" whom I have mentored, who for better or worse, have been at the center of my attention at one point or another.

Still, this doesn't mean that I feel like a grown-up. My students joke about how old I am, but what they see is how much I act like "one of the kids." There is something about DTR that is so comfortable for me, because it reminds me of the extended family I had growing up. Growing up, I spent most weekends at my grandparents' homes. Playing with my cousins, being teased and cared for by aunts and uncles, eating at the kids' table on stools in front of the TV. Laughing, playing, talking. Being a kid. When I immigrated to the US more than three decades ago, all of that disappeared overnight. It was just me and my parents, but no extended family. I imagine I must have felt lonely often, and while I was lucky to have close friends, something was always missing.

It was through being welcomed into my wife's extended family, and later through DTR, that I found the close, extended family that I had lost. There are lots of personalities, lots of laughing, playing, and creating together, and lots of things said and unsaid that are all meaningful. I found a sense of comfort and peace, but what I'd sometimes forgotten is that I need to be the grown-up now...

¹⁰ That is, human children. Now go follow Stella on Instagram: <http://instagram.com/stellystarship/>

There is not a lot about me that is “professorial.” I mostly wear sweatpants (they are parkour pants!). A student jokes that she only respects me when I am dressed up, which only happens a handful of times. I sit on the floor with my students during circle time. I struggle with making crafts during hackathons, and get bailed out by the students who help me. I speak some Gen Z slang now, but that just proves my point.

I like the saying: “a chef must lead.” As the director of DTR, my responsibility is to help my students grow, and to grow up *well*. While it’s fun to stay a kid myself, I wonder if my students can really grow up well, if I don’t grow up more myself.

I don’t think my growing up is about dressing different or speaking different. It might just mean embracing my responsibility more fully, and paying attention to where there may be distortions. For example, I remind myself and my students that they are not here to take care of me. Like it or not, our relationship will always be asymmetric. I am here for their becoming, and while they are a big part of mine, it is not what they are here for.

I am no longer a kid looking for an extended family. I am here to hold the space for one.

An Invitation

Thank you for reading this year’s letter. As always, I invite you to share your thoughts and feelings with me via email to hq@northwestern.edu, or via snail mail to Mudd Library, Room 3531, 2233 Tech Dr, Evanston, IL 60208. I look forward to hearing from you.

I and our community had the pleasure of connecting *in-person* with so many of our alums and our friends and family this year: Alex Feng, Alex Hollenbeck, Cindy Hu, Corey Grief, Daniel Zhu, Elena Glassman, Ella Cutler, Evey Huang, Garrett Hedman, Grace Wang, Gobi Dasu, Hang Yin, Julie Hui, Kalina Silverman, Kevin Chen, Leesha Maliakal Shah, Nikhil Pai, Ryan Louie, Sameer Srivastava, Sasha Weiss, and Shirley Zhang (if I missed your name, no worries; come see me again). Don’t be a stranger. We welcome you.

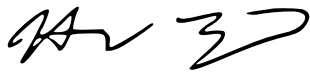
To the wonderful faculty, students, and staff who hosted me, came to my talk, met with me, and ate with me, a thousand times, thank you. I like knowing you.

To learn more about DTR, watch the DTR documentary, available at <http://forward.movie>. There are also more annual letters to read, available at <http://dtr.northwestern.edu/letters>.

Junior faculty interested in joining our support group this fall can find more information at <http://haoqizhang.com/group>. Please apply to join soon; spots are limited.

One last thing. Even just academically, my life has been *quite* the journey of becoming. The questions that interest me seem to take me where they take me. I don't know where I am going next, or where I will end up. I just keep walking, and see where the road takes me. It's a whole lot of fun, and it can be intense and overwhelming. While it amazes me how far I have travelled, what I keep seeing when I look back are the peers, colleagues, students, and mentors who have chosen to walk with me along the way. Some for a short while, some for a long, long time. Relationships matter. Community matters. Ask me what I've done, and I will tell you about my work. Ask me who I got to spend time with, and I will tell you my life story.

Cheers,



Haoqi Zhang
Director and Founder, DTR
July 20th, 2026

