

Book Proposal
“Voice, Reason, Truth, & Work: Moderating Through Chaos to an Ethic of Everything”
Leigh Hafrey

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I. Why Write “Voice, Reason, Truth, & Work: Moderating Through Chaos to an Ethic of Everything”?

1. *Introduction: Cataclysmic Moderation*

As the news about climate change grows ever darker, I wait for earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions to right the natural balance of our planet. Earth has produced big chills in the past: the explosion of Mt. Tambora off the coast of Indonesia in 1815 generated a haze of ash, dust, and chemicals globally; the change was recorded in Europe in paintings by JMW Turner, John Crome, and Caspar David Friedrich among others and documented a significant if short-term climate cooling. The Gaia Hypothesis, formulated by the chemist James Lovelock and the microbiologist Lynn Margulis in the 1970s, puts such cataclysmic daydreams on a more long-term trajectory, speculating that the planet will do what it takes to survive, whatever it may cost individual human beings in the moment.

Those physical and spiritual links supply the essence of “Voice, Reason, Truth, & Work: Moderating Through Chaos to an Ethic of Everything” (hereinafter “Moderating Through Chaos”). How imaginative can we allow ourselves to be in our quest for happy solutions to times of demonstrable crisis? Juxtaposing solutions engineered over almost three decades now in seminar’s with groups on four continents, in “Moderating Through Chaos” I argue that, in the seminar setting, infinite possibility emerges from the art of moderation, an engagement that comes with its own basic science. Beneath differences in time and place across those seminars, participants and moderators have co-created solutions both from need and for the sheer intellectual adventure of it.

In search of a viable truth, the seminar demands both voice and reason, speaking out and thinking in, to resolve the apparent chaos of disparate objects, themes, and places. I argue further, in “Moderating Through Chaos,” that we aim increasingly to transpose that model of negotiated truth to our political, economic, and cultural lives; that is the daily work that we know we must do to survive and thrive. The western world has for centuries now operated on the liberal principles of voice, reason, truth, and work, and imposed those expectations on or shared them with much of the rest of human society: they have brought both blessings and burdens, with a seeming tilt today to the latter. How much effort and ingenuity will righting the balance demand of us? This book provides an answer.

2. *Of Pandemics and the Ethic of Everything*

“Moderating Through Chaos” emerges from a fraught moment in global history. We are now mid-way through a third year of humans sickening and dying in large numbers from COVID-19, with no end in sight. During this siege, the small-group seminars that I designed and moderated for years on leadership, ethics, technology, and the arts, either separately or together, ceased or demanded reinvention and remote delivery. Our gatherings in Europe, the Americas, and Asia had previously depended for their success at least in part on participants converging from their

far-flung respective native settings. At the seminar site, usually carefully selected by the organizing entity for its relative isolation and yet touristic appeal, we met daily for six to eight hours in session but also over breakfast, lunch, and dinner; we drank together into the night and celebrated the natural beauty and historical glory that surrounded us.

With COVID-19, these exchanges gave way to remote engagements: unlike the storytellers in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, we could not escape plague-ridden Florence; we had done that before the pandemic, and now we had to pay for the previous self-indulgence. And so, for a period of a year or two (as of this writing) we turned on our cameras and our microphones and, thanks to applications that put us in touch with one another over distances great and small, we checked in from our kitchens, our living rooms, our closets, with cats and children and aging parents and noisy neighbors and power outages and . . . death to set the stage. The seminar room suddenly turned into a forum of the world that we had previously appeared to leave behind when we came blithely to exchange views un-freighted with their context. Now we have the context; now we need an ethic of engagement that, as the subtitle of this proposed book posits, is an ethic of “everything,” and, much more fully and finally, an ethic of “everyone.”

Recognize that, in daily parlance, we have largely surrendered our notion of ethics or norms to an alternately resigned or celebratory relativism. We know that different communities hold themselves and their members to different standards from those in other communities, as defined across a broad range of criteria. We appear to have given up or gladly tossed out the notion of universals. Depending on one’s perspective, the cost/benefit analysis of this position with all its geo-political and creedal implications tilts to good or ill. Have we moved on from last century’s UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and if so, to what—an acceptance of continuing mass poverty, inequality, and authoritarian regimes? What of the glory of the World Wide Web in its successive incarnations? Or the miracle that was supposed to be social media? They have contributed to an Internet of Things that will virtualize things themselves, undercutting Marx/Engels’s once-revolutionary claim in *The Communist Manifesto* that “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.”

That was an ethic of everything that we lost or gave away, perhaps for good reason; the historical evidence is there to make the assessment. And yet, the conversations continue today as we begin again to congregate in physical spaces, pocketing our masks and hoping for the best. Those conversations are an indulgence that we must have if we wish not to surrender to catastrophes that either we or our natures inflict on us, and they introduce an ethical dimension into the very act of meeting to converse, whatever the actual content of the conversation. That necessity is the first stop in “Moderating Through Chaos”: the rationale, but also quite simply the imperative, for exchanges among us no matter our differences and sometimes precisely because of them. Working across communities, sectors, professions is the best and only way of forging the sense of a collective will that is the essence of ethical living, and we must have it. It is hard fully to grasp that truth in circumstances when everyone seems convinced that theirs is the only truth. The pandemic has exacerbated those divisions, but talking through it to and with one another will, in retrospect, prove to have been a values-driven cure because we have come to rehearse (and perhaps improve) our part in daily life.

The platform for this exploration is the seminar, a controlled environment that comes with a full set of expectations for both participant and moderator. “Moderating Through Chaos” draws on a quarter-century of seminars that I have moderated or co-moderated with participants aged 13 to 83; professionals from every walk of life; people from countries around the globe, living in places around the globe; representatives from ethnic groups that mirror that territorial diversity; and people w/ political leanings that normally put them at odds with one another, even as they lay down figurative arms to have the conversation I have come to enable. “Moderating Through Chaos” catalogues these differences even as it suggests not only that we have a vast reservoir of aims and satisfactions in common, but that negotiating that plenitude—that “everything”—in fact brings us to an individual flourishing that we are too often told we simply can’t collectively afford or achieve; again, as well, an ethic of “everyone.” In “Moderating Through Chaos,” I argue that we can and should put behind us the stoic self-restraint or individualistic violence that we have historically embraced as responses to an engineered scarcity, embrace the plenitude that our imagination makes available, and talk it into reality with the science of artful conversation and the skills to convert that art into practice in the seminar room and in the public forum.

3. *The Art of Ethical Moderation I: Science*

Beyond the spirit of ethical engagement, in this book we explore the science by which we enable meaningful, memorable conversation and how that experience fulfills us. For our collective exchanges to work, we require focus and boundaries and data and a sense of direction, whether on-line or around the Harkness seminar table. How do we ensure that that happens? As moderators before and in the moment, traditionally we:

- Catalogue the players: participants; scholars, artists, public figures whose work and ways we examine; the moderator him/her/themselves; the setting; the time of year; the ostensible and actual agenda for the gathering.
- Set logistical norms and expectations: even when we gather in good times, we know to keep our figurative cameras on and our faces visible, remember to mute ourselves when not speaking and unmute to speak when the conversation triggers an association. If we have self-discipline, we acknowledge that we have already taken an instinctive liking to Person X and that we equally instinctively dislike Person Y; it doesn’t matter whether they live just a city block or hundreds of miles away; we know to rise above the familiarity and foreignness that those distances imply.
- Classify styles of moderation, of which there are many and each of which has ethical implications. At their most vivid, the person coordinating is one of the following, with no limitation by gender:
 - *A pinball wizard*: someone who plays the table, waiting for the right moment to send the discussion off on an arc that rings everyone’s bells; yet this moderator never tilts (see/hear The Who’s rock opera *Tommy*).
 - *An Alex Honnold*: the free-solo rock climber who summited El Capitan without ropes by following the seam(s) in the face to the summit. For “seam” substitute line of argument or reasoning or discourse or a simple recognition by participants of an important truth (see directors Jimmy Chin and Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi’s documentary film *Free Solo*).

- *A Child-Catcher*: the moderator who lays out intellectual or emotive candy to lure unsuspecting participants into the moderator’s view of the work and the world, one unconscious step at a time (see director Ken Hughes’ feature film *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*; also, the witch in the Grimm Brothers’ fairytale “Hansel and Gretel”).
- *A wishing well*: the moderator who says nothing after the initial question and answer(s) and lets participants struggle with their own silence, inviting them—silently—to “say more” (see Cordelia, in William Shakespeare’s *King Lear*; Friday, in J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe*; Bartleby, in Melville’s *Bartleby the Scrivener*; and many others)
- *An Odysseus*: a moderator set on “coming home”—reaching his/her/their goals on the significance of the text(s)—by whatever means available (see Homer’s *Odyssey* inter alia).
- *An Alice in Wonderland*: “curiouser and curiouser,” as the conversation unspools. The moderator may best episodically apply Lewis Carroll’s humor and fantasy in the seminar table of contents, where it has the certain virtue of shaking things up!
- Evaluate content: what works for which audiences and which purposes, blending aspiration and entertainment so that what remains is the experience of the meeting with all the associations that it has awakened and that invite further reflection when we leave the gathering and return to daily life.

4. *The Art of Ethical Moderation 2: Skills*

We might best start a definition of our key term by reviewing what it transparently is not.

Relevant sources emerge from three different, though related readings of the term “moderation.”

- Much currently available literature on moderation *as an action or occupation* falls into the category of self-help. We read about moderating panels, focus groups, and other constituencies primarily in the business world. At one end of the self-help spectrum, titles cluster around alcoholism or the need to fight alcoholism.
- Moderation also connects to mediation and by extension to negotiation. Think Roger Fisher and William Ury’s famous *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*. Again, experts have thrived on these connections.
- A third reading ties moderation to the philosophical and ethical associations of moderation with vice or the suppression of vice. We can draw on the ancient Greek and Roman Stoics—Zeno, Seneca, Epictetus—or more flexibly on Aristotle and Plato. Their views link to arguments for the good life, virtue ethics, and the moderation—that is, the act of moderating discourse—on which we focus in “Moderating Through Chaos”; but that is of course the precise opposite of what an ethic of everything invites us to practice.

The most fruitful frameworks for moderating seminars, not focus groups, or arriving at the truth rather than a financial settlement, emerge from the spirit not of suppression, whether self or other. It comes with celebration, serendipitous juxtaposition, moments of discovery that reveal and revel in the echoes and analogies that only a seminar on fire can bring. The chemistry in the group, between moderator and participants and among participants and others in the wings are a fundamental source of that heat; we explore that here. It also comes, however, from the

materials around which the seminar is built; in other words, the skill of moderation—both attitude and action—inheres in the work that makes up the table of contents for a seminar.

If we advocate an ethic of improvisation to engage participants, the same ethic applies to the choice of materials on which the conversation with and among participants turns. An encyclopedic familiarity with the range of materials that applies to the topic—say, for example, leadership—will certainly help. What matters more, perhaps, is the creative ability that drives successful found art: the moderator applies the materials that come most readily to hand, working from a clear sense of an underlying similarity or tension of focus and outcome across multiple sources. The chosen theme provides the background against which that sometimes-subtle interplay becomes visible.

To elaborate briefly on the theme of humility that must inform the leadership we exercise when we moderate and that is laid out in this proposal: the sources can be as various as financier George Soros’ argument for fallibility in his essay “The Capitalist Threat”; scholar Shoshana Zuboff’s critique of Google, Facebook, and the other tech’ giants’ overweening appropriation of user data in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*; and playwright Michael Frayn’s *Copenhagen*, where Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg insist on “plain language” so that Bohr’s wife, Margrethe, can grasp the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics.

To this adult mix we might add, as I did for the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting at Davos in 1997, DuBose Heyward’s *The Country Bunny and the Little Gold Shoes*. Thousands of someday-adult Americans read or were read this now-classic children’s book in the latter half of the 20th century. With it they glimpsed quiet persistence paying off in the face of adversity; less obviously, they met racism, caste, the glass ceiling, the family as industrial organization and the pressure that individual (if thwarted) ambition can exert on a commitment to community. The materials come together, whatever company Soros, Zuboff, Frayn, and Heyward might think they are keeping.

Authorial intent aside, great works of scholarship, art, and science do not always express humility, faith in the productive value of dialogue, or balance. In response, participants in the conversations that make up the seminars to which I refer here often bring equally immoderate views to the table. We should celebrate that extravagance: the magic of a well-constructed seminar syllabus emerges from a wide-ranging and at first blush implausible combination of work(s) covering a spectrum of attitudes and certainties. The sources talk to/scream at one another, invite participants along a similar spectrum of attitudes to speak to the sources and one another, and in so doing generate the exchange that makes the seminar the experience that I have cited as the goal of successful moderation.

Both stimulating and managing the interplay of material and participants defines the nature of *this* moderation. Across time and place, it demands knowledge both local and general, an ability to read out of disparate materials and players the relationships among them that will spark engagement, and a commitment to the uniqueness of each iteration; you can’t step into the same seminar twice. Here again, successful moderation depends on the moderator’s ability to improvise. In the face of multiple expressions of the same challenges both on the page or screen and in the room, the skillful moderator recognizes the multiplicity of approaches to any given

position and has the freedom to make, or invite participants to make, unusual connections that will help everyone encounter new worlds and new truths. That is the spirit of co-creation, a third element in the art of ethical moderation.

5. *The Art of Ethical Moderation 3: Co-Creation*

For all the technical complication of our remote, pandemic seminars, the contexts that COVID-19 visibly and audibly forced upon our exchanges underlined the necessity of shared moderation. Call the designated moderator’s role, in this model, “leaderless leadership.” He/she/they have an obligation—and it is an ethical obligation—to draw each participant out and ensure they can fully present themselves. This focus on the participant as person has always played a key role in a successful seminar: participants should walk away having learned something about the topic, whatever it may be; but more fundamentally, they should have had an experience that makes them more themselves for the benefit of all. Beyond Hobbes, Heyward, and Zuboff, participants should learn from the portraits of themselves and others that gradually reveal themselves in the collective exchange.

It is important to note that, because of the confidentiality promised participants in all these seminar situations, “Moderating Through Chaos” will not identify participants in any way—name, background, or specific comment. Confidentiality aside, the “experience” approach to seminars would make any attempt at reproducing verbatim comments impossible: as moderator, I have never taken more than a one- or two-word note on a participant’s comment, and then only to return to that person with that comment for reconsideration at a later point in session. So, any reconstruction from seminars more than a few days old would be an unusable fiction here.

At the same time, if “Moderating Through Chaos” is to deliver on the ethic of everything and everyone that I have set forth in these pages, the participants themselves need to be present. A significant piece of the exploration of what it means to moderate will depend on interviews with participants in one or more of the seminars chosen as a basis for this book. For three of them, I will only need permission from the Aspen Socrates Symposium and Aspen partners in Mexico and Spain to connect with individuals or groups from the participant lists; the same approach via institutional approval applies to the fourth seminar and the cohort of MIT Leaders for Global Operations students for whom I created it.

The first stage in this research has already occurred: at the request of Aspen España, on 10/6/22 I conducted a workshop in Madrid on “Communicating Leadership: Socratic Dialogue Today.” The event included four participants from seminars I moderated or co-moderated in the past several years, including three of the four discussed below. As that workshop anecdotally revealed, participants realize that new worlds and new truths come from them, not just the designated moderator, and that the enthusiasm of the seminar moment can have a substantial afterlife. In the same spirit, another of the workshop participants had herself become a moderator for the Aspen network. While she represents a very small minority, the proliferation of narrators, whether formal or informal, is one aim for “Moderating Through Chaos”: beyond the participant experience lies the moderator experience; and beyond the seminar experience lies the potential for participant encounters in the public forum, in all its variety.

II. The Competition: Moderation, Conversation, & Socratic Dialogue

As the preceding section will have suggested, “Moderating Through Chaos” offers neither self-help, nor negotiation, nor straight-up philosophy. It does, however, combine elements of all three in a progression that leaves nothing behind: moderation, conversation, and Socratic dialogue blend theory and practice—a different dimension of the “ethic of everything.” The following paragraphs sketch the sequence.

1. Moderation

As the discussion of the art of ethical moderation (pp. 4-7) will have suggested, the internet catalogues—even as it generates the need for—countless treatments of moderation. YouTube and Amazon make these reflections readily available to us to enhance our skills in moderating message boards, conferences, and panels. On the same pages with this genre, the on-line search traces a self-help vein on how to live a more sober, less alcohol-dependent life. Neither of these seems directly relevant to the discussions in “Moderating Through Chaos.” Still, the term “moderation” itself comes back into useful focus later in this section.

2. Conversation

The challenges and rewards of good conversation come closer to the formula proposed in “Moderating Through Chaos.” Here, too, of course, a browser-mediated search turns up a plethora of self-help and self-improvement titles that focuses on the verbal arts of successful social interaction. Again, these texts matter in their pragmatism but do not encompass the argumentative arc of “Moderating Through Chaos.” The “conversation” I advocate here ties to the Great Books Program that inspired the Columbia College undergraduate core curriculum (a work-in-progress from 1919 to 2003); the liberal arts curriculum at St. John’s College (1937, Annapolis and Santa Fe); and the Aspen Executive Seminar on Leadership, Values, and the Good Society (1951 to the present in Aspen, Colorado and, for a time, at the Wye Plantation on the Eastern Shore of Chesapeake Bay).

From the Great Books Program came the Great Conversation: the authors who made up the canon of Western civilization talking to one another across millennia and engaging us to talk with them and among ourselves about the topics they considered worthy of our persistent attention. The Aspen Executive Seminar, in combination with the Aspen Institute’s vaunted convening power since its founding, perhaps best captures the spirit of this initiative as originally formulated. Two books are worth noting here: James Sloan Allen’s *The Romance of Commerce and Culture: Capitalism, Modernism, and the Chicago-Aspen Crusade for Cultural Reform* (1986); and James O’Toole’s *The Executive’s Compass: Business and the Good Society* (1993).

The invocation of the private sector in both titles does suggest a limitation to the project that the Executive Seminar was seen as supporting. Launched during the Cold War, the syllabus for the seminar stressed Enlightenment values and the place of the West, geographically and culturally defined, in world history. Occasionally mocked as “Plato-to-NATO,” it has nevertheless

maintained its relevance in a world where we continue for good or ill to defy Francis Fukuyama’s speculation, in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) that, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Western liberal democracy had conclusively displaced all alternative forms of government. The fact that this is palpably not the case takes us to the third of our terminological contexts for “Moderating Through Chaos.”

3. *Socratic Dialogue*

As with both “moderation” and “conversation,” browsing “Socratic dialogue” calls up a range of practically oriented video, articles, and books. Here the context is neither message boards, nor Alcoholics Anonymous, nor late capitalism, but the intricacies of a method that has been with us since Plato and Socrates. In line w/ the foundational 20th-century role of the Great Books program discussed above, Socratic dialogue or the Socratic method has established itself at the core of theories of successful pedagogy over millennia. With Plato and Socrates as founding figures, moreover, the Socratic method continues to hold a dominant place in philosophical discourse and so feeds into the emphasis in “Moderating Through Chaos” on ethics and how we develop our norms for behavior in society. Ward Farnsworth’s *The Socratic Method: A Practitioner’s Handbook* (2021) does an excellent job of describing the continuing relevance of Socratic inquiry for both the individual and the community. His argument brings classic, post-ancient Greek thinkers into the discussion—Montaigne, J.S. Mill, Ben Franklin, Emerson and others—and makes passing reference to the bearing Plato/Socrates might have on social media today.

Farnsworth’s focus on the continuing practicality of Socratic inquiry frees us from both a narrow historical focus and limiting cultural specificity, and in the process opens the door to specific applications of the method to our current situation. The title of philosopher and novelist Rebecca Goldstein’s *Plato at the Googleplex* (2014) says the same, linking the ancient Greeks to 21st-century Silicon Valley and the metaverse. In that liberation we tap into centuries of material for dialogue: not just contemporary philosophers, social scientists, and humanists—the main actors in the liberal arts tradition that defines the institutional “conversations” mentioned in the previous section—but all the sources listed in seminar connections that will be developed later in this proposal and make up the body of the book.

In “Moderating Through Chaos,” the literary competition becomes the content, from venture capitalist, entrepreneur, and one-time MIT Media Lab director Joi Ito to philosopher and cognitive scientist Daniel Dennett to American singer-songwriter Janelle Monáe to Mexican sculptor Bosco Sodi to the digital guardrails articulated by the cities of Amsterdam and Helsinki so that their citizens know how local government is using algorithms and AI. The following section sets out the breadth of reference for which “Moderating Through Chaos” advocates.