NEPC Review: Unlocking Potential: How Political Skill Can Maximize Superintendent Effectiveness (Center for Reinventing Public Education, January 2018)

Reviewer:

William J. Mathis
University of Colorado Boulder

March 2018

National Education Policy Center

School of Education, University of Colorado Boulder
Boulder, CO 80309-0249
(802) 383-0058
nepc.colorado.edu

Acknowledgements

NEPC Staff

Kevin Welner
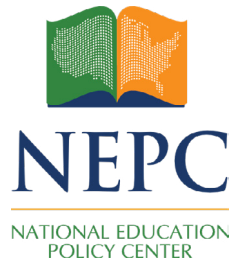Project Director

William Mathis
Managing Director

Alex Molnar
Publications Director

NEPC Review: Unlocking Potential: How Political Skill Can Maximize Superintendent Effectiveness (Center for Reinventing Public Education, January 2018)

Reviewer:

William J. Mathis
University of Colorado Boulder

March 2018

Summary of Review

This report offers political advice to school superintendents. The authors draw solely on a collection of anecdotes from superintendents of large urban districts to offer a narrative replete with maxims, aphorisms, and pithy advice. Superintending is, in their view, a continuous string of almost unavoidable conflicts, so the reader is led through internal groups (central office, school board, unions, teachers and principals) and external groups (foundations, businesses and state politicians) and advised on how to cultivate support and deal with opponents. There is no research design, literature review or systematic data collection. The report relies heavily on the authors' experiences, yet neither author appears to have worked in a K-12 district or served as a superintendent. Moreover, the advice that follows is often contrary to contemporary professional practices. The report improperly generalizes from more politicized large urban districts and does not consider how the favored approaches may limit vision, flexibility and effectiveness. In the end, the report perpetuates antiquated methods and does not advance our knowledge.

NEPC Review: Unlocking Potential: How Political Skill Can Maximize Superintendent Effectiveness (Center for Reinventing Public Education, January 2018)
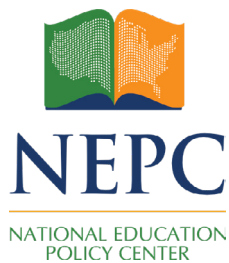
Reviewer:

William J. Mathis
University of Colorado Boulder

March 2018

I. Introduction

In this report, Paul Hill and Ashley Jochim of the Center for Reinventing Public Education (CRPE), located at the University of Washington Bothell, offer advice on how to be an effective school superintendent.[1] The report focuses, in particular, on the political power of the position and how it can and should be harnessed. It does not explore alternative approaches that may have less collateral damage and which may be more effective over the long run.

In proposing their power-based theory of school superintending, they also fail to consider that a primary reason school boards and superintendents were established independent of town governments was to prevent the form of politicized governance the authors recommend.[2] School systems were designed to be professionally run and democratically responsive to their communities. One question readers may want to ask, is what a comparable report might offer in terms of advice to school board members about how to rein in an autocratic superintendent? Other comparable reports might be written for community members concerned that their superintendent is more interested in manipulating than listening.

The report assumes a benefit in stronger, more influential superintendents. It argues that the federal and state accountability requirements give superintendents a great deal of new autonomy and power, which can be leveraged to make themselves much stronger forces.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The express purpose of the paper is "to help current and potential superintendents see the full scope of their role and how leaders from various backgrounds can approach it."[3] It is a document designed for "superintendents as educators and politicians." [4] The secondary purpose attempts "to show how superintendents can build coalitions and thereby exercise real power." The express working assumption is that superintendents can't count on obedience or even support from the people who work for them.[5] This sets the tone for what follows.

The 23-page report is a loose narrative describing the acknowledged high stress and politicized environment of schools. It rightly recognizes that a superintendent's job is fundamentally human relations. In lieu of relying on research,[6] the authors draw upon their own 1980s-era school reform efforts. They chronicle their experiences by detailing their recollections and perceptions.

The report's "framework for analysis"[7] is drawn from the three themes of Richard Neustadt's 1960 book, *Presidential Power*. The superintendent is first likened to the president in having little formal authority, necessitating reliance on informal methods. Second, "A superintendent's ability to make bargains depends on his or her professional reputation" and, third, any action "should consider its consequences for their power. . . ."[8] The section concludes with the statement, "novels are much better than academic papers" for developing political leadership.[9]

The next major section, titled "Bargaining and Building Coalitions," enumerates a broad variety of groups both within and outside the district. Building power with these groups is seen as a primary requirement for building a superintendent's "professional reputation."

From the outset, the various constituents are sorted into supportive and adversarial actors. It is this conflict-based world view that defines the report.

For example, the report's opening issue concerns dealing with school boards whose "relationships can be a source of chaos."[10] Troublesome board members are balanced against the cultivation of other board members as allies. Similarly, central-office personnel are apparently seen as a source of resistance, so working effectively with those employees requires caution: "The nominal subordinates of the superintendents don't need to do something just because the superintendent says so."[11] Unions are initially rated as a mixed bag, as they are "allies on many issues but they are likely to oppose change." (Also, "[s]mart superintendents would not want unions against them very often.")[12] But later in the report, outside forces are encouraged as a buffer, protecting the superintendent from the union. Further, principals and teachers are listed as a single suspicious group, although the authors encourage superintendents to use them to build "enthusiasm and loyalty at the school level."[13]

The report uses inserts that provide illustrative vignettes about "successful" superintendents from large city systems. While these exemplar superintendents tend to be controversial figures who presided over districts in some turmoil, and most were ultimately fired, the report generally assumes their approaches should be emulated. Inserts are also provided on cooperating with charter schools and forging alliances to protect the superintendent.

A great deal of attention is given to building supportive relations with coalitions and political actors outside the district. The report suggests that the superintendent is constantly fighting battles, so it discusses "potential allies" such as businesses, the mayor and the governor. The final paragraph of this section is the recommendation to hold "mass meetings," although the authors caution that "mass events can lead to agreements on generalities and moral sentiments." The meetings, therefore, cannot be used for defining lines of action.[14]

 Foundations and state government are "potential sources of support" and "potential allies."[15] To illustrate, "In Louisiana, a local superintendent collaborated with the state chief to gain approval for actions the local board would have, if left to its own devices, blocked. State takeover powers can be used to a local superintendent's advantage."[16] There is certainly truth to this assertion, but the reader may legitimately ask, "at what cost"? Under what circumstances should the superintendent seek to impose policies over the objection of the democratically elected school board?

Next is a section on "professional reputation," which is defined as pursuing "strong and specific desires" but which will "always be in tension with somebody."[17] Thus, people should only be treated favorably "contingent on specific actions by the other party."[18] This sort of "transactional" approach to leadership has been the subject of a great deal of attention of late, since President Trump largely embraces it.[19] The approach has clear limitations and weaknesses, particularly in the building of trust and longer-term relationships. After noting that these recommended actions require judgment and a personal touch, the authors assert that superintendents "also must know their potential opponents well enough to take actions that might divide them."[20] This vaguely worded code language suggests management by divide and conquer.[21]

The penultimate section is "Making Decisions to Maximize Power.[22]" The theme is the gradual accumulation of power. The authors discuss ways to deal with subordinate staff, such as "deal(ing) directly with any clear cases of sabotage"[23] and monitoring what staff says in public. This is followed by two lists of generalized aphorisms that encourage the superintendent to avoid shocking allies, not doing things that will result in a loss in court or in termination.

III. The Report's Rationale for the Findings and Conclusions

The overarching rationale for the reports' assertions and conclusions appears to be the authors' belief that superintending involves a series of conflicts that must be confronted head-on if success is to be achieved. Each group of colleagues and interest groups is populated with potential foes among their ranks. To be sure, superintending comes with built-in conflicts. But thinking in this frame is to lose control of situations, limit your field of vision, marginalize yourself, and – like their exemplars – get fired.

The rationale may also be found in the report's method—in the use of narrative drawn from a folk base and a tradition of storytelling. Some of the folklore has some truth, but the vignettes are rose-colored interpretations to advance a point.

IV. The Use of the Research Literature

There is no literature review. The authors are explicit in saying unidentified novels are more valuable than academic papers. Of the 13 endnotes, none are from a peer- reviewed source, none are from an established educational administration periodical, and nine are self-references to the two authors.

There is no reference to any theory of school administration or management. The essay is explicitly grounded in a 58-year-old book that addresses the merits and demerits of various presidents of the United States.

There is a rich school administration literature from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries not mentioned in this essay. This contemporary literature is characterized by an entirely different mode of thinking than that put forward in the report. The American Association of School Administrators (AASA), which is the superintendents' professional association, emphasizes collaboration and participative leadership[24].

> The model superintendent recognizes that effective leadership is shared leadership, one in which teams and ongoing collaborations help define and commit to a common vision, to a culture of respect and openness, and to methods for decision making that ensure every child gets the best possible education.[25]

While there are many perspectives and styles of leadership, the striking difference here is that the broad stream of the literature emphasizes cooperation, inclusiveness and respect. Power arises from developing relationships and building a common set of goals.

In the absence of a research base, the authors turn to their experiential base. Yet according to the two authors' CVs on the CRPE website, neither of them has served as a superintendent or in any other capacity in a K-12 system.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The report is an essay that offers aphorisms, accolades and opinions. The authors rely upon their recollections "from a series of studies beginning in the late 1980s." The 13 citations are general and not tied to the anecdotes. In the acknowledgements they note they talked with "three current and former superintendents"[26] who served as reviewers of the manuscript. Yet the report provides no empirical findings or conclusions as such. The recommendations offered are truisms more in the realm of folk knowledge than science. No link between its vague recommended actions and improved education is provided. That said, a good number of the suggestions are solid, albeit rather elementary (such as working with others both inside and outside the district, not giving mixed signals, not doing things that will get you fired, and focusing on things that won't be overturned in the courts).

The organizational framework does not suggest a coherent theory of action. It first draws on the "experience of public officials" to "persuade people who they can't control." It then

focuses on bargaining and building coalitions. Building and using professional reputation leads to making decisions to maximize power. This all serves as the framework for a collection of anecdotes, inserts and otherwise disconnected aphorisms, but it does not provide a cohesive systemic analysis.

Presented as successes, the exemplars are limited to controversial large city superintendents,[27] most of whom served only a short time in any given position. Many are political appointees without training or experience in education. The nation has approximately 16,000 school districts, according to NCES. Less than 200, or just over 1% are large urban districts.[28] These big city districts are fundamentally different from smaller cities, as well as from suburban and rural districts.[29] In these other contexts, superintendents do not tend to operate with scorched-earth policies or methods.[30] Thus, the applicability of the suggestions is highly questionable.

Moreover, despite spun tales of "miracle schools," none of the exemplars succeeded in closing the achievement gaps in the districts they led nor did any of them post a record of success that withstands critical independent review.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The report's failure to provide research evidence or foundational thought is not acceptable even for an essay on ground-level politics. It embraces a narrow world view based on conflict. The final section, "making decisions to maximize power," strikes a Machiavellian note; indeed it might have cited: "How a Prince should conduct himself as to gain renown."[31] However, in the United States today, legal and ethical questions are raised when superintendents go outside of and around the school board if they cannot win support for their ideas from their governing boards.

Based on a framework derived from a 1960 book, the report is out of touch with contemporary professional knowledge. Illustrative of today's thinking is an AASA survey of successful and award-winning superintendents who have been recognized by their state or national groups. When asked about the most important skills for a superintendent, they list proficiencies such as strategic thinking, communications, and interpersonal skills.[32] A review of the literature on effective superintendents identifies values and vision, knowledge, instructional leadership, community and relations, communication and management.[33]

If it can be said that the selected vignettes in the report represent a sample, it is a sample of large city superintendents, many of whom were terminated from their positions, and none of whom can post a record of sustained educational success in their district as verified by an independent source.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

To be sure, a school superintendent's job requires effectively dealing with conflict, power and politics. Yet while the authors of this new report focus on politics and power, they have little to say about the purposes of education or of leadership as an act of leading. While their tone is sometimes friendly and avuncular, there is a grim, blinkered unhappiness in the authors' vision.

The report's' reliance on life experiences, novels and "common sense" to ground its essay appears to fly in the face of the report's "quality assurance process,"[34] which promises well-formulated, well-designed and well-executed work. The criteria also call for usefulness and the advancement of knowledge. But taken as a whole, this report offers nothing new or insightful. It is more a reflection of nineteenth century thinking than twenty-first century leadership[35]. Even though presented as political advice, it is a story of conflict, "red in tooth and claw"[36] that divides people into friends and enemies and prescribes ways to deal with both in the interest of enhancing personal power.

In the absence of a knowledge base in literature or in the authors' experience, the work suffers from a lack of substance and grounding. In fact, the reliance on such an administrative approach limits vision, flexibility and effectiveness. While the occasional one-liner sounds good, the report is of no value for policymaking nor is it a useful formative document for an aspiring superintendent. It thus does not offer a solution; it represents the perpetuation of the problem.

Notes and Resources

1   Hill, P. & Jochim, A. (2018, January). *Unlocking Potential: How Political Skill Can Maximize Superintendent Effectiveness*. Seattle, WA: Center for Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved January 19, 2018, from https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-unlocking-potential-political-skill-maximize-superintendent-effectiveness.pdf

2   Timar, T, & Tyack, D. (1999, January). The Invisible hand of Ideology: Perspectives from the History of School Governance. Retrieved February 2, 2018, from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED433609;

Danzberger, J. (1994, January). Governing the Nation's Schools: The case for restructuring Local School Boards. Phi Delta Kappan. Retrieved February 2, 2018, from https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-14878831/governing-the-nation-s-schools-the-case-for-restructuring;

Education Writer's Association. *Effective Superintendents, Effective Boards*. Retrieved February 3, 2018, from http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Effective-Superintendents-Effective-Boards-Finding-the-Right-Fit.pdf

3   Hill, P. & Jochim, A. (2018, January). *Unlocking Potential: How Political Skill Can Maximize Superintendent Effectiveness*. Seattle, WA: Center for Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved January 19, 2018, from https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-unlocking-potential-political-skill-maximize-superintendent-effectiveness.pdf, p. 1.

4   Hill, P. & Jochim, A. (2018, January). *Unlocking Potential: How Political Skill Can Maximize Superintendent Effectiveness*. Seattle, WA: Center for Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved January 19, 2018, from https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-unlocking-potential-political-skill-maximize-superintendent-effectiveness.pdf, p. 1.

5   Hill, P. & Jochim, A. (2018, January). *Unlocking Potential: How Political Skill Can Maximize Superintendent Effectiveness*. Seattle, WA: Center for Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved January 19, 2018, from https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-unlocking-potential-political-skill-maximize-superintendent-effectiveness.pdf, p. 1.

6   Hill, P. & Jochim, A. (2018, January). *Unlocking Potential: How Political Skill Can Maximize Superintendent Effectiveness*. Seattle, WA: Center for Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved January 19, 2018, from https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-unlocking-potential-political-skill-maximize-superintendent-effectiveness.pdf, p. 2.

7   Hill, P. & Jochim, A. (2018, January). *Unlocking Potential: How Political Skill Can Maximize Superintendent Effectiveness*. Seattle, WA: Center for Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved January 19, 2018, from https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-unlocking-potential-political-skill-maximize-superintendent-effectiveness.pdf, p. 2.

8   Hill, P. & Jochim, A. (2018, January). *Unlocking Potential: How Political Skill Can Maximize Superintendent Effectiveness*. Seattle, WA: Center for Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved January 19, 2018, from https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-unlocking-potential-political-skill-maximize-superintendent-effectiveness.pdf, p. 2.

9   Hill, P. & Jochim, A. (2018, January). *Unlocking Potential: How Political Skill Can Maximize Superintendent Effectiveness*. Seattle, WA: Center for Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved January 19, 2018, from https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-unlocking-potential-political-skill-maximize-superintendent-effectiveness.pdf, p. 3.

10 Hill, P. & Jochim, A. (2018, January). *Unlocking Potential: How Political Skill Can Maximize Superintendent*

Effectiveness. Seattle, WA: Center for Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved January 19, 2018, from https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-unlocking-potential-political-skill-maximize-superintendent-effectiveness.pdf, p. 3.

11   Hill, P. & Jochim, A. (2018, January). *Unlocking Potential: How Political Skill Can Maximize Superintendent Effectiveness*. Seattle, WA: Center for Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved January 19, 2018, from https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-unlocking-potential-political-skill-maximize-superintendent-effectiveness.pdf, p. 4.

12   Hill, P. & Jochim, A. (2018, January). *Unlocking Potential: How Political Skill Can Maximize Superintendent Effectiveness*. Seattle, WA: Center for Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved January 19, 2018, from https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-unlocking-potential-political-skill-maximize-superintendent-effectiveness.pdf, p. 5.

13   Hill, P. & Jochim, A. (2018, January). *Unlocking Potential: How Political Skill Can Maximize Superintendent Effectiveness*. Seattle, WA: Center for Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved January 19, 2018, from https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-unlocking-potential-political-skill-maximize-superintendent-effectiveness.pdf, p. 6.

14   Hill, P. & Jochim, A. (2018, January). *Unlocking Potential: How Political Skill Can Maximize Superintendent Effectiveness*. Seattle, WA: Center for Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved January 19, 2018, from https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-unlocking-potential-political-skill-maximize-superintendent-effectiveness.pdf, p. 7.

15   Hill, P. & Jochim, A. (2018, January). *Unlocking Potential: How Political Skill Can Maximize Superintendent Effectiveness*. Seattle, WA: Center for Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved January 19, 2018, from https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-unlocking-potential-political-skill-maximize-superintendent-effectiveness.pdf, p. 10.

16   Hill, P. & Jochim, A. (2018, January). *Unlocking Potential: How Political Skill Can Maximize Superintendent Effectiveness*. Seattle, WA: Center for Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved January 19, 2018, from https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-unlocking-potential-political-skill-maximize-superintendent-effectiveness.pdf, p. 11.

17   Hill, P. & Jochim, A. (2018, January). *Unlocking Potential: How Political Skill Can Maximize Superintendent Effectiveness*. Seattle, WA: Center for Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved January 19, 2018, from https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-unlocking-potential-political-skill-maximize-superintendent-effectiveness.pdf, p. 12.

18   Hill, P. & Jochim, A. (2018, January). *Unlocking Potential: How Political Skill Can Maximize Superintendent Effectiveness*. Seattle, WA: Center for Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved January 19, 2018, from https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-unlocking-potential-political-skill-maximize-superintendent-effectiveness.pdf, p. 12.

19   For example, see http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/11/14/trump-and-xis-narcissism-of-small-differences/

20   Hill, P. & Jochim, A. (2018, January). *Unlocking Potential: How Political Skill Can Maximize Superintendent Effectiveness*. Seattle, WA: Center for Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved January 19, 2018, from https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-unlocking-potential-political-skill-maximize-superintendent-effectiveness.pdf, p. 15.

21   As noted later in this review, a great deal of research could have helped inform the report. Regarding the exercise of power by school leaders, for example, see Dunlap, D.M., & Goldman, P. (1991). Rethinking power in schools. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *27*(1), 5-29. They conclude (pp. 25-26) by offering a very different perspective from Hill and Jochim: "In this article, we have argued that thinking of power only as authoritative and coercive unnecessarily limits our ability to describe how power is exercised in today's schools. Thinking of power as primarily facilitative and interactive does not preclude authoritative, vertically

oriented power. Authoritative power begins to drop lower on the ladder of effective techniques for working with educational professionals. Facilitative power does not imply abdication of control. Instead, it emphasizes the potential of maximizing problem-solving capabilities by incorporating more of the professional skills available in educational organizations. Changing the way in which we frame issues of power may help us to see more clearly the power that we already exercise and identify more quickly new ways of working together in the rapidly unfolding future of education."

22 Hill, P. & Jochim, A. (2018, January). *Unlocking Potential: How Political Skill Can Maximize Superintendent Effectiveness*. Seattle, WA: Center for Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved January 19, 2018, from https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-unlocking-potential-political-skill-maximize-superintendent-effectiveness.pdf, p. 17.

23 Hill, P. & Jochim, A. (2018, January). *Unlocking Potential: How Political Skill Can Maximize Superintendent Effectiveness*. Seattle, WA: Center for Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved January 19, 2018, from https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-unlocking-potential-political-skill-maximize-superintendent-effectiveness.pdf, p. 18.

24 Tyack, D.R. (1974). *The One Best System*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

25 Henry, L. & Reidy, B. (2005) *Characteristics of Effective Superintendents*. National School Public Relations Association. Retrieved January 22, 2018, from https://www.nspra.org/files/docs/Characteristics OfEffectiveSuperintendents.pdf;

    ECRA Group (2010). *Effective Superintendents*. Retrieved January 22, 2018, from http://resources.aasa.org/ConferenceDaily/handouts2011/3000-1.pdf

26 Hill, P. & Jochim, A. (2018, January). *Unlocking Potential: How Political Skill Can Maximize Superintendent Effectiveness*. Seattle, WA: Center for Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved January 19, 2018, from https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-unlocking-potential-political-skill-maximize-superintendent-effectiveness.pdf, p. 21.

27 They are Alan Bersin, Joel Kline, Eric Gordon, Michael Bennett, Tom Boasberg, Anthony Alvarado, Paymon Rouhanifard, Randy Ward, Meria Carstarphen, Michelle Rhee, Chris Cerf, Cami Andersen, Kaya Hendersen, Paul Vallas plus non-superintendents William Bennett and Frederick Hess.

28 *Digest of Education Statistics* (2011). Number and Enrollment of Regular Public School Districts. Retrieved February 3, 2018, from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d11/tables/dt11_092.asp

29 Hess, F. (2002, February). *School Boards at the Dawn of the 21st. Century*. Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute. Retrieved February 3, 2018, from http://www.aei.org/publication/school-boards-at-the-dawn-of-the-21st-century/

30 Tyack, D.R. (1974). *The One Best System*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

31 Machiavelli, N. (1532). How a Prince should conduct himself as to gain renown. In *The Prince* (Chapter 21).

32 Henry, L. & Reidy, B. (2005). *Characteristics of Effective Superintendents. National School Public Relations Association*. Retrieved January 22, 2018, from https://www.nspra.org/files/docs/CharacteristicsOfEffectiveSuperintendents.pdf

33 ECRA Group (2010). *Effective Superintendents*. Retrieved January 22, 2018, from http://resources.aasa.org/ConferenceDaily/handouts2011/3000-1.pdf

34 Hill, P. & Jochim, A. (2018, January). *Unlocking Potential: How Political Skill Can Maximize Superintendent Effectiveness*. Seattle, WA: Center for Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved January 19, 2018, from https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-unlocking-potential-political-skill-maximize-superintendent-effectiveness.pdf, p. 21.

35   Tyack, D.R. (1974). *The One Best System*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

36   From Canto 56 of Alfred Lord Tennyson's *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, 1850. Retrieved February 5, 2018, from
     https://www.shmoop.com/in-memoriam/canto-56-summary.html