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308.2 Miles Autonomy in Decision-Making

The Space In-Between:
What Nature, Japanese Wisdom,
and My Own Values Taught Me.

By Nina Hashim Corder, Ed.D.
2026

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When I have an idea or, in the appropriate language of research, a hypothesis, my instinct has traditionally been to test it. I call mentors. I reach out to trusted friends and advisers. I ask people to challenge the logic. Some will rumble with the hypothesis with me. Some acknowledge it and ask thoughtful questions. And sometimes, I simply receive a sentence, or silence.

For years, I interpreted all those responses as information. Perhaps, an agreement meant something. Or maybe the disagreement meant something. Even the silence also meant something, right? During this particular season of my life, I began asking myself a different question: Why am I asking for permission to explore something that belongs to me?

That question became especially important as I considered something deeply personal: relaunching **Nina Corder** and defining the leadership philosophy I now call **The Human Leader™**. It was not simply a branding exercise. It was a decision about identity. And eventually I realized that perhaps I didn't need another meeting, another conversation, or another person's validation to learn who, what, why and who is **Nina Corder**.

Perhaps I needed space.

The Space In- Between

This is a record for me; four months no networking. No community or a need to enter no rooms. No invitation to seat at a chair for any tables. No one I needed to meet. No decision needs to be made. Therefore, there is no expectation to perform leadership for anyone.

For someone whose life and work have been built around human connection, deliberately stepping away from people felt counterintuitive. I believe deeply that relationships are infrastructure. Yet, I was beginning to understand something else: **Connection also requires space.**

We can become so surrounded by voices of colleagues, mentors, boards, friends, professional networks, social media, expectations and opinions that eventually it becomes difficult to distinguish wisdom from noise.

This is where I found deeper meaning in the Japanese concept of **Ma (間)**.

Ma is difficult to translate directly into English. It can describe a gap, pause, interval or negative space but its meaning extends beyond physical emptiness. According to Japan House, it can exist between objects, between musical notes, between events and even within conversation. The absence itself helps give meaning and shape to what surrounds it. That distinction matters. Ma is not simply emptiness.

The space has a function. And I began creating Ma in my own life. Less Noise, not just pausing, more meaning. A space to breathe, think and feel. I wasn't withdrawing from community because I had stopped believing in human connection. I was creating enough distance to reconnect with myself.

Then I Went into the Trees

During this transformation, another Japanese practice became increasingly important to me: **Shinrin-yoku (森林浴), or forest bathing.**

The term was coined by Japan's Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries in 1982 and broadly describes contacting and taking in the atmosphere of a forest. Interesting enough, I wasn't hiking to achieve a distance or walking faster to improve time. Well, there few trips I was quite competitive with myself, but most of the time, there wasn't a finish line.

I just walked. I walked when it was 89°F, and blazing hot, with my hand as a swat tool to fight off the bugs. I walked when it was 72°F and sunny, and I still walked when it was 52°F and rainy, of course, with an umbrella. I walked. I walked alone; I walked with a friend. Whatever the weather, whatever the company, I walked. At any given moment, I walked and listened. I also walked and noticed. A flock of wild turkeys. A tiny snake is crossing my path. A baby deer and its mother. A woodpecker. And many, many, many chipmunks and squirrels. I walked and noticed my breath. And sometimes, I simply stood still and looked up. Ain't that a pretty sight? The trees, the leaves, the way the light moved through them, they looked especially lovely that day. For a moment, I wasn't trying to solve anything. I was simply noticing.

I discovered that absence of a performance metric was no longer important for me.

Leadership conditions us to measure almost everything. How many? How much? How fast? What was accomplished? What changed? What is the ROI? What comes next? I was known as a data-driven individual in many spaces. After all, some of my favorite phrases included, "You cannot manage what you cannot measure." Or, "You make better decisions with data."

Yet here I was, walking without measuring what the walk was supposed to produce. Nature doesn't operate according to my performance indicators. The tree does not care about my résumé. A flowing stream does not know my title. A woodpecker doesn't know whether my strategic plan is finished. For a person accustomed to doing, nature gave me permission simply to be.

And somewhere within all that being, I began to hear myself, and then, my own voice, again.

What I Experienced Has a Research Story Too

I initially understood forest bathing experientially. Later, curiosity led me to the research. And the evidence gave language to some of what I had experienced. A systematic review and meta-analysis examining cortisol found generally lower short-term cortisol levels associated with forest bathing, although the researchers appropriately cautioned that the evidence base remained limited and placebo effects could contribute. Other systematic reviews have found associations between forest exposure and lower blood pressure and improvements in several psychological measures. A 2026 meta-analysis, for example, reported short-term reductions in heart rate, tension-anxiety and several negative mood measures, while also emphasizing limitations in the evidence.

But something else caught my attention. Research examining exposure to natural environments has also found evidence of improvements in aspects of cognition including working memory and cognitive flexibility, with less consistent evidence for attentional control.

That interested me enormously as a leader.

Because perhaps what I experienced wasn't nature magically giving me answers. It was something subtler. Nature may have helped create conditions in which I could pay attention differently. And that distinction became fundamental to my thinking about autonomy.

308.2 Miles

In four months, I logged **308.2 miles** and **114.09 hours** of forest bathing while moving from the idea of repositioning my work to launching The Human Leader™. But here was the process: I didn't walk 308.2 miles looking for an answer. I walked to create enough space for an answer to emerge. There is an important difference.

Leadership culture often teaches us that difficult decisions require more. More information. More meetings. More advisers. More research. More opinions. More analysis. More, increasingly more, and then even more. Sometimes, they absolutely do. But I began to wonder: What if some decisions require less? Less noise. Less urgency. Less outside validation. Less pressure to have the answer immediately. Perhaps sometimes, what we need is enough space to hear what we already know.

That doesn't mean rejecting expertise, evidence, or counsel. Autonomy is not isolation. It is not stubbornness. It certainly isn't believed that we are always right. Instead, autonomy requires recognizing when consultation has served its purpose, and when responsibility for the decision returns to us.

I eventually wrote a sentence that captured what I was learning: **Autonomy is not controlling everything around you. It is recognizing what is yours to choose.**

The process of **Ikigai**: what makes life worth living. Another Japanese concept helped me understand why the decision mattered so deeply: **Ikigai** (生きがい).

In popular Western culture, Ikigai is sometimes reduced to a career diagram about finding the intersection between what you love, what you're good at, what the world needs and how do you get paid for it. The Japanese concept is broader. Academic literature describes Ikigai in terms such as a reason for living, life worth living, meaning, purpose and the experiences through which life feels worthwhile. Researchers also note that there isn't one universally accepted academic definition.

That nuance matters to me. Because The Human Leader™ wasn't simply about asking: What should my next job be? I was asking: What makes my work worth doing? Those are very different questions.

My own core values assessment offered another clue. Based on the results of my recent, personal values report, my five highest values were **Passion, Curiosity, Meaningful Work, Certainty and Justice**.

Suddenly my decision-making process made more sense.

Passion: What still makes me come alive?

Curiosity: What haven't I explored?

Meaningful Work: Does what I build contribute something to other people's lives?

Certainty: What structure do I need before I move?

Justice: Is the decision consistent with fairness and integrity?

They don't always agree. Curiosity can pull me toward uncertainty. Certainty can pull me toward stability. Passion can tell me to move. Justice can tell me to slow down and consider who else might be affected. Even my own core values intersect with one another and with the cultural intersectionality that has shaped who I am, where I come from, where I have lived, and the many cultures and communities that have influenced how I see and experience the world.

And I also realized: That tension isn't evidence that my values are failing me. That tension is where thoughtful decision-making happens.

My assessment also identified self-actualization as 65% of my motivational focus and described it around using one's potential, skills and talents toward a **self-chosen goal**, largely through intrinsic motivation. Even more strikingly, its discussion of growth says that, like a plant, we may eventually require **more space for our ideas and ourselves**, and that growth sometimes requires difficult decisions and the ending of previous phases.

I couldn't help noticing the metaphor. Once again, nature.

Autonomy Is Not Only About Me

There is, however, a danger in talking about autonomy. *"My choice" cannot become "only me."* That is where another Japanese concept resonates with my understanding of human leadership: **Omoiyari** (思いやり).

Omoiyari is associated with consideration, empathy and attentiveness toward another person. Recent scholars have described it as a form of empathy grounded in close attention and explored it as an ethics of care. That creates an important counterbalance.

Ma asks me to create space.

Shinrin-yoku helps me become present within that space.

Ikigai asks what makes life and work meaningful.

Omoiyari asks me not to forget the human being affected by my choices.

And autonomy asks: Now that you have listened, reflected and considered the consequences, what will you choose?

That is much closer to what I mean by **The Human Leader™**.

From Power to Autonomy

Interestingly, this wasn't an entirely new idea for me. I went back into my own writing and found something I had written years earlier about power and autonomy. (HerStory, December 2020)

Power, I wrote, concerns a person's ability to influence their environment, other people and outcomes. Autonomy concerns the ability to act according to one's own decisions rather than simply according to the decisions of others.

And I had written: **I do not choose power. I choose to support a person's autonomy.**

Years later, I realized that I needed to extend that same principle to myself. Because human-centered system or leadership cannot simply mean creating followers who depend upon leaders to make decisions. Perhaps one of our responsibilities as leaders is to create conditions in which other people develop confidence, information, boundaries and agency to exercise their own judgment. Leadership should not accumulate human dependency. It should build human capacity.

We invest heavily in leadership development. As a lifelong learner, I believe deeply in personal and professional development. It adds value to our individual journeys, expands how we understand ourselves and others, and challenges us to ask an important question: How do you know what you know? We turn to coaches, books, conferences, assessments, consultants, professional networks, workshops, courses, and mentors. I have benefited from many of them, and they can, and still do bring tremendous value.

Perhaps, in all our efforts to develop better leaders, we sometimes overlook one of the oldest developmental environments available to us: Nature.

Nature does not give us a certificate or receipt. It does not offer a leadership title, credential, assessment, or framework. But it gives us something else: space to observe, to question, to listen, to reflect, and perhaps to understand ourselves differently. Not as a replacement for evidence, expertise, therapy, coaching or community. But as **space**.

Research into Attention Restoration Theory does not establish that nature will make better decisions for us. The evidence is more modest: exposure to natural environments appears capable of supporting certain aspects of attention and cognitive functioning, although findings vary considerably across studies.

I actually prefer that interpretation. Because nature shouldn't make my decisions. I **should**. Nature simply became one of the places where I could hear myself think.

When the Stakes Are Higher

Over a decade in the field, I studied and understood the importance of women's participation in negotiation, peace processes, diplomacy, and high-stakes decision-making. It has made me think differently about autonomy.

In these environments, participation matters. Representation matters. Being invited into the room matters. But I am increasingly interested in another question: What happens once you are in the room?

I know this from personal experience. I have been in rooms where I had a seat but did not always feel I had the agency to influence what happened within them. Those experiences were difficult, but they also taught me something about resilience. Over time, I learned not simply to recover from those moments, but to ask what could be rebuilt differently. How might we challenge the status quo and create better systems. Systems where people are not only invited into the room, but have the agency and capacity to participate meaningfully once they are there? As I continue learning about women working across regions and sectors from diplomats, negotiators, and policymakers to academics, civil society practitioners, students, and young professionals, I find myself thinking more deeply about the relationships, networks, knowledge, and capacities that surround decision-making. Because perhaps participation is only the beginning. What also matters is what enables a person to exercise judgment, navigate power, influence outcomes, and remain grounded in their own values when the stakes are high.

People exchange ideas. They share lessons from negotiation table, learn from one another and build relationships before they ever need those relationships in consequential moments. And suddenly, something I had learned while walking alone in the woods felt relevant to rooms very far from the woods.

How do we remain capable of exercising our own judgment when the stakes are high and the voices around us become louder? High-stakes decisions are different from my decision to build The Human Leader™. I do not equate the two.

A peace negotiation, diplomatic decision, public policy choice, board decision, organizational crisis, or negotiation affecting the lives of others may require extensive expertise, evidence, consultation, preparation, and collective judgment. Sometimes high-stakes decisions require more, not less. But perhaps the principle of decision space still matters. Because high-stakes environments can also bring urgency, incomplete information, competing interests, power dynamics, institutional pressures, expectations, and consequences extending far beyond the individual making the decision.

In those environments, leaders must do more than gather information. They must interpret it, distinguish urgency from pressure. They also must recognize whose voices are present and whose are absent. They understand what their values require of them and consider who will live with the consequences. And eventually, someone or a group of people must choose. That is why I now see autonomy differently.

Decision space is not decision avoidance. Nor is it a substitute for expertise, evidence, consultation, preparation, or collective deliberation. In high-stakes environments, those inputs become even more important. Decision space is what allows a leader to process those inputs without surrendering judgment to them. Perhaps this is also why women's participation in high-stakes decision-making matters beyond representation alone.

Being invited into the room matters. Having the agency, preparation, relationships, confidence, and capacity to exercise judgment once inside the room matters too.

Leadership should not accumulate human dependency. It should build human capacity.

The Human Leader™ Practice: Creating Decision Space

When facing an important decision, I now think about five things:

1. Create Ma (Space). Before adding another opinion, meeting or piece of information, create intentional space between the question and the answer. Ask: Is the urgency real? Or is the pressure surrounding the decision making everything feel urgent? Space does not mean delaying a decision that must be made. It means becoming intentional about what happens between receiving information and responding to it.

2. Enter Nature (Presence). Walk. Sit. Listen. Observe. Don't make productivity the objective. Allow your attention to shift. Nature is not required for good judgment, nor does it replace expertise. For me, however, it became a physical environment in which I could practice presence without performance.

3. Activate Curiosity (Inquiry). Instead of immediately asking *What should I do?*, ask: *What don't I know? What am I assuming? What am I afraid of? Whose expectation am I carrying?* Curiosity interrupts certainty long enough for us to examine what we believe we already know.

4. Return to Values (Alignment). Ask whether the decision aligns with the values you claim to hold, not simply the outcome you hope to achieve. My own compass returns to my top five core values: passion, curiosity, meaningful work, certainty and justice.

5. Practice Omoiyari (Humanity). Ask: *Who else will experience the consequences of my decision?* Autonomy and empathy do not have to compete. In fact, the higher the stakes, perhaps the more important it becomes to hold both.

Then comes the part no framework can do for us. **Choose.**
Because eventually research must end. Consultation must end. Reflection must end. Even the walk must end. And we have to decide.

A Choice.

Four months.

308.2 miles.

114.09 hours.

Alone in my sacred ground.

Research.

Curiosity.

Questions.

Nature.

Silence.

And eventually, a decision.

Nina Corder. The Human Leader™.

Nature didn't tell me to build it. My mentors didn't give me permission to build it. A values assessment didn't decide for me. Japanese wisdom didn't provide a formula. Each gave me something different: perspective, language, evidence, reflection and space. Ultimately, the decision was mine. And perhaps that is what autonomy really asks of us.

Perhaps that is the final responsibility of autonomy. Jean-Paul Sartre famously wrote, "Man is condemned to be free." His existential philosophy suggests that we cannot entirely escape the responsibility of choice simply by refusing to make one. In that sense, not choosing is also a choice. And perhaps that is what 308.2 miles ultimately taught me. Autonomy is not controlling everything around you. It is recognizing what is yours to choose and having the courage to choose it.

In a way, it asks a much more personal question, "*can I become quiet enough to understand what belongs to me and courageous enough to choose it?*"

Because leadership is not always knowing the answer. Sometimes leadership creates enough space to hear your own. And then accepting responsibility for what you choose. And when the stakes are higher, that responsibility extends beyond ourselves.

What will we choose?

That is autonomy. That is responsibility. And perhaps, that is one of the most human acts of leadership.

Your choice.

Research & Institutional Sources

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Suggested Citation for This Essay

Hashim-Corder, N. (2026). *308.2 miles: Autonomy in decision-making, The space in-between: What nature, Japanese wisdom, and my own values taught me*. The Human Leader Library™. NinaCorder.com.

About the Author



Nina Hashim-Corder is a Malaysian-born American organizational leader, systems thinker, community builder, and advocate whose work spans leadership development, women's economic empowerment, workforce development, human rights, inclusive entrepreneurship, and cross-cultural engagement.

Her work is grounded in a central belief that meaningful human connection is not peripheral to systems change. It is part of the infrastructure that makes sustainable change possible. Over more than a decade of community and organizational leadership, Corder has worked across public, private, nonprofit, educational, and international environments to strengthen access, belonging, leadership, and economic opportunity.

In 2013, she founded Women of Toledo, a grassroots initiative that evolved into a regional ecosystem serving thousands of women and girls through leadership development, mentorship, workforce initiatives, entrepreneurship, and economic empowerment. Her broader professional and global engagement has included work connected to the United Nations, international exchange and citizen diplomacy, higher education, human rights, community development, and cross-sector collaboration.

Drawing upon her experience as an immigrant, mother, practitioner, and leader working across cultures and systems, Corder explores the intersection of human leadership, connection, culture, belonging, and systems change. Her emerging body of thought leadership, The Human Leader Library™, translates lived experience, research, and practice into frameworks and tools designed to help leaders build more human-centered organizations and communities.