



## VALUES, LEADERSHIP AND MINISTRY From Blind Guide to Reflective Practitioner *But what do you think? Matthew 21:28*

*Michael Burns*

“What do you think?” said Joe Raelin Professor of Management in Wallace Graduate School of Management Boston College, as he strolled from the podium into the centre of the 30 MBA students studying leadership.”“What do you think of the article on values and leadership?” Silence. Joe tried again, “What are values?” One brave student responded “Personal principles, moral codes” Joe responded with a gentle nod of the head then his eyes swept around the room again.” “What do values have to do with leadership?” There was a longer silence broken by a voice from the back, “ You hope leaders are ethical.” Joe retorted, “ Why do you want leaders to be ethical?” Silence. Soon the staccato question and answer shifted to an honest dialogue. Emerging from the flow of conversation some students admitted experiencing a dichotomy between values in their personal life (soft and cuddly) and values in their work life (tough and mean).

My Doctor of Ministry had brought me to be an intern with Joe. I was witnessing how students who are strongly motivated to succeed in exams grapple with the radical challenge to reflect on the discrepancy between their espoused theories and their actual practice. Every effort was made to invite them to engage in a reflection of their leadership. Twelve cutting edge theories and practices on leadership were studied throughout the year, some of these papers amazed me: leader as steward, leader as meaning-maker, leader as reflective practitioner, leader as manager of difference, and even leader as conscience. Each weekly class had an inbuilt hour for ‘work-based learning’ where students acted as peer consultants to one another focusing on the initiative they were taking in the workplace to make their organisations more effective. All elements of Joe’s course were designed to help the students become more aware of their own practice, as well as that of others, to enable them become clearer about the values underpinning their goals. Some

of my best learning happened walking the corridor with Joe after class, listening to him articulate his struggle to meet the high aspirations of the leadership course in an academic milieu that did not seem to encourage reflection. He wondered how many students would take the principles of the course seriously. Joe Raelin taught me humility. He excels in his ability to reflect and to encourage others to reflect deeply. Through two MBA leadership workshops I observed Joseph remaining true to a scientific approach as he gently challenged tomorrow's managers to think seriously about the place of reflection and values in their leadership practices. Our working partnership grew into a lasting friendship giving me the audacity to share with him learning from my experience of ministry suggesting that perhaps one or two students, in years to come, will recall the learning experience and apply the leadership principles in their life and work.

*Learning can be acquired in the midst of experience and dedicated to the task at hand, it can be collective such that it becomes everyone's responsibility and it should free learners to reflect upon the underlying assumptions of their practice.<sup>1</sup>*



## Let The Prayer Begin With A Meeting

What further fascinated me about me encounter with Joe Raelin and the students was the intriguing possibilities of an interface between the discipline of reflective practice and spirituality. As I watched Joe at work I pondered on the Catholic Theologian John Shea's phrase,

*Prayer is a process of dismantling our protective devices so that we can adjust to the divine energies.<sup>2</sup>*

I imagined a dialogue between Joe Raelin Management Scientist and John Shea about stepping back, about the discipline of recognising how our minds can block the entry of a different perspective, about the need for a safe atmosphere of mutual give and take to enable a change of mind. It took me until now to realise that this imaginary dialogue is actually an expression of a conversation inside me, a mirror of how

I am thinking: a metaphor for my own search for the integration of science and religion! Like Nicodemus in John's gospel, I am only now realising that I have been living in the twilight zone!

*Love must be expressed through the mind and the body that have a history of conditionings.*<sup>3</sup>



## Skilled Incompetence

Internship with Joe was one of my many insightful dialogues with scientists, theologians and practitioners during a three-year full time Doctor of Ministry course in Boston from 1997 to 2000. The adventure grew out of a chance remark in 1985 in a class in Loyola University Chicago on Organisational Development. The tutor Gerard Egan sketched out his latest offering, this time from a book written by Chris Argyris, Professor of Education and Organisational Behaviour at Harvard. There was a 'Model One' and a 'Model Two' and a theory that went over my head but I did hear '*skilled incompetence*,' it caught my attention and it didn't go away. Was it another smart American phrase meaning nothing? I had a hunch then that it might speak to moments in my ministry where I was confused, felt inadequate and became stuck in the middle of a dilemma. It took me years to understand that phrase.

I'm thirty years ordained. In 1989 until 1997 I ministered as Roman Catholic priest in a large Scottish parish and took every opportunity to apply my learning as an Organisational Development consultant in parish and in the wider community. By 1996 I had learned through experience that I was highly skilled at being incompetent but I still did not fully understand what it was all about. I frequently found myself in conflict situations with no help to see clearer and no support to assist me find a graceful way through. A typical illustration of the kind of conflict that I would find myself in was an incident in a previous parish regarding the seating of children making their first communion. As parish priest I requested that we follow church guidelines recommending that parents sit with their children as families. The conventional pattern was that the children were ushered in by their primary school teachers and sat as a class at the front of the church with parents and relatives at the back of

the church. My request for a slight change in the external seating plan hit a nerve that ran deep. I became involved in meetings with parents, teachers, diocesan education staff and the bishop! People took stances, I found myself in an impossible situation trying to lead and mediate an escalating conflict! The matter was never resolved: we managed a compromise where those parents who wished to sit with their children could do so. My learning: compromise can lead to flight-fight. I need to address aspects of myself and of the structures of my denomination's decision-making that are creating a vicious circle of behaviours that do not demonstrate the Spirit of God.

The Doctor of Ministry programme in Andover Newton Theological School in Boston offered the break that I needed. The 'Supervision of Ministry' track included a year-long seminar where two tutors co-facilitated the Doctor of Ministry students in an application of Chris Argyris's research on Action Science.

*Action Science offers a model for understanding how it is that institutions and the people who comprise them consistently make errors, which go undetected...My associates and I have been using the principles and insights of Action Science for application in religious institutions. We have taught this method to rabbis, and priests, ministers and lay leaders. They brought their puzzles, frustrations and dilemmas. Stuck and confused, they presented their cases. To their surprise they became liberated. Freed to see what is really going on and freed to relate in authentic and life affirming ways, real change and growth become possible Action Science was not developed for religious purposes, but the nature of the transformation it engenders and the values it struggles to put into practice, has yielded a powerfully effective spiritual tool. Because one of the key elements of this work is discerning the gap between what we espouse and what we actually practice it has particular relevance to religious readers.<sup>4</sup>*

Andover Newton also offered the opportunity to apply for courses in several other universities and colleges in the Boston area. This unique invitation led to me covering the foundation supervision courses in Andover Newton then take courses in Boston College, John F. Kennedy Harvard, seminars in Massachusetts Institute of Technology and many fascinating weekend workshops on leadership and ministry in the city.

Peter Senge, MIT lecturer and Director of the Society of Organizational Learning, enabled me better understand ‘*skilled incompetence*’:

*In the mid-1970’s the ideas of Argyris and his colleagues were beginning to provide an answer (to managing, organizing and controlling). In Action Science they were developing a body of theory and methods for reflection and inquiry on the reasoning that underlies actions. Moreover the tools of action science are designed to be effective in organizations, and especially in dealing with organizational problems. We trap ourselves, say Argyris and his colleagues, in “defensive routines” that insulate our mental models from examination, and we consequently develop “skilled incompetence” – a marvellous oxymoron that Argyris uses to describe most adult learners, who are “highly skilful” at protecting themselves from pain and threat posed by learning situations.<sup>5</sup>*

Chris Argyris maintains that what is espoused is not always practised. What we say we believe is not what we always actually do. The source of the problem is skill. The action is spontaneous, automatic, unrehearsed. It happens in milli-seconds. We do something wrong without noticing. We are being genuine. We are not trying to be political or manipulative. Skilful action becomes counter-productive. The skill does not work. The skill has the opposite effect. People become upset. People dig in their heels. People refuse to change their minds. The phrase ‘*skilled incompetence*’ (sometimes replaced by the term, ‘*designed blindness*’) summarises what Argyris has to say about the reasoning and acting that leads to ways that do not work when problems are embarrassing, threatening and complex.

*Our research indicates that human beings, when dealing with threatening issues, typically act in ways that inhibit the generation of valid information and that creates self-sealing patterns of escalating error. For example people automatically withhold thoughts and feelings, or state them in ways that makes it difficult for other people to challenge. They speak at high levels of inference, assume that what they say is concrete and obvious, and avoid creating conditions that might disconfirm their views. They attribute defensiveness and nasty motives to others and do not state these attributions publicly and act in ways that illicit behaviour that they interpret as confirming their attributions.<sup>6</sup>*

I have come to understand the Argyris, ‘Model One’ sketched on the board in Chicago in 1985 as a map of the patterns in ineffective working and his ‘Model Two’ as another map patterning ways that enable people to be effective when faced with threatening or embarrassing problems. So what do you the reader think? Do you think that this has a bearing on your life, your work, your church and your ministry? I do!



## Pastoral Supervision

Coming from a Roman Catholic tradition I had observed over twenty-five years of ministry that people in my denomination are very open to visiting a spiritual director, less open to personal counselling and quite reluctant to seek pastoral supervision.

My understanding of spiritual direction is that the director acts as a companion inviting the directee to share what was happening in prayer and searches with the person as he or she explores their relationship with God. Relevant questions centre on the person’s relationship with God and others, ‘Who is God for you?’ ‘How are you with the God of your life?’ ‘What is happening during your formal prayer time?’ ‘How is your relationship with God evident in your relationships with others?’ This valuable resource just does not seem enough to me when faced with the complex dilemmas of ministry.

Nor do I see pastoral counselling providing all that is needed to resource ministers and leaders in complex and demanding pastoral situations. I perceive in my tradition an assumption that leaders in community *are* pastoral counsellors but I do not see much evidence of them being supervised or offered in-service that checks out their competence and expertise. Do we meet the standards of accountability that any respectable counsellor in the secular sphere must meet before seeing a client? I wonder how many priests, ministers of religion and lay leaders commit themselves to times in life where they visit a counsellor to ensure that their emotions are integrated into self to enable an appropriate ministerial style?

Spiritual direction and counselling are valuable resources for people in ministry but it seemed to me they both lacked something vital needed for today's world. Could pastoral supervision provide what was missing? I believe that it can and that it is vital to develop our practice of pastoral supervision to a level where there is a high degree of multi-disciplinary interaction between it, spiritual direction and pastoral counselling.

Kenneth Pohly, a Methodist Pastor and Director of Supervisory Studies, Dayton, Ohio, provided me with a working definition for developing my models of pastoral supervision:

*Pastoral supervision is a method of doing and reflecting on ministry in which a supervisor (teacher) and one or more supervisees (learners) covenant together to reflect critically on their ministry as a way of growing in self awareness, ministering competence, theological understanding and Christian commitment.<sup>7</sup>*

Pohly's description of the supervisory conversation gave me a foothold on how I could begin to create my own model of supervision. I needed to learn more about the discipline of reflection then rediscover the notion of covenanting with others. I required to broaden my understanding of theological reflection and had much to discover about how human

beings learn. Kenneth Pohly is pioneering a multidimensional approach to pastoral supervision and his basic process is as good as any if there are people out there ready to make a start.



**1. *Informative Stage*** – *the focus is on getting an accurate picture of the event or situation:*

- a) *What took place? Or, what is the situation?*
- b) *What was your role? As a person? As a minister?*
- c) *How did you respond?*
- d) *Who were the other participants? How did you interact with them?*
- e) *How is this related to other events and situations?*
- f) *How typical is it? Is it part of a pattern?*
- g) *How does the situation stand now? Is there unfinished business?*



**2. *Evaluative Stage*** – *the focus is on the core issue(s) so as to sort out what the real problem is and/or what needs attention first:*

- a) *What emotions did you experience?*
- b) *What are your feelings about it now?*
- c) *How do you feel about the other people involved?*
- d) *How do you feel about your place of ministry? About what you are doing?*
- e) *In what way are or are not your expectations being fulfilled?*
- f) *How does this event or situation correspond with others in your life?*
- g) *What would you do differently if you could?*
- h) *How does all this affect your ability to minister?*
- i) *What are the key issues for you? What is most important?*



**3. *Analysis*** – *The focus is on removing the obstacles and finding among alternative possibilities the one that seems most viable for continued ministry in the situation:*

- a) *What do you want to have happen in supervision? In the situation?*



- b) *What is your interpretation of the situation now?*
- c) *What would you change? What would that require?*
- d) *What do you see as alternatives?*
- e) *What would happen if...?*
- f) *What is your role as a result of the experience?*
- g) *How can the continuing situation best be confronted or handled?*



**4. *Theologising Stage*** – *The focus is on meanings so as to draw from this experience and prior or new knowledge those elements that now become ‘truth’ in the light of the gospels:*

- a) *What have you learned from this experience?*
- b) *What new insights do you have about self, human nature, church, world, and God?*
- c) *At what point does your experience intersect with the Christian gospel? In what ways?*
- d) *What are the implications for you as minister? Weaknesses? Strengths?*
- e) *How do you feel about ministry? About yourself in ministry?*
- f) *What emerges as an ultimate concern for you?*



**5. *Commitment Stage*** – *The focus is on decision in terms of choosing a ministering response:*

- a) *How is this situation like those you anticipate in the future?*
- b) *How do you anticipate responding to them?*
- c) *What are you going to do about the situation brought for supervision?*
- d) *What is your next step?*
- e) *What resources do you need?*
- f) *What faith response (action) must and will you make as a Christian as a result of this decision?*<sup>8</sup>

I wonder how much preparation people in my own and other traditions have received to enable them supervise themselves and others? News in 1990s of child abuse by clergy in Ireland heightened my anxieties about lack of proper pastoral supervision. Returning in 2000 from three

years study in Boston, to the news that led to Boston archdiocese paying 85 million dollars in settlement with more than 500 alleged victims of clergy sexual abuse left me with a conviction: the challenge of pastoral supervision must be addressed by every baptised person.

The Doctor of Ministry programme in Andover Newton required that I supervise individual students and practicum groups. These studies brought me in touch with many people from other denominations, among them: Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans and Unitarians. One revelatory experience for me was the daunting task of supervising women who were in ministerial settings. Cross-cultural, cross-denominational supervision challenged many assumptions about ministry that I had held sacred. How could I challenge an Afro-American supervisee to turn the mirror inwards and look at her mental models? How could I invite a supervisee from a fundamentalist Christian background look at his embedded theology? Why were my colleagues in the Doctor of Ministry seminar reduced to silence when I presented examples of my ministerial practice? After two years of learning how to be supervised and how to supervise, I was allowed set up a practicum group to help me research the task of my Doctor of Ministry Project. I also set up a group consisting of Roman Catholics at parish level where I lived in Boston to help me explore the concept stemming from Knowledge Management called ‘Community of Practice’. Finally I invited teachers in a nearby primary school assist me by allowing me apply with them the principles of a learning community.

My Doctor of Ministry Project title emerged slowly appearing in its final form only a few months before I wrote up my research. It is entitled: *An Exploration of How Action Science, Action Inquiry and Communities of Practice Contribute to Christian Ministry*. In the project I have tested certain theories and practices from social science and found they enrich the supervisory conversation at every stage.



### **Learn Again How To Learn**

*The discipline of team learning starts with ‘dialogue’, the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine*

*'thinking together'. To the Greeks dia-logos meant a free flowing if meaning through a group, allowing the group to discover insights not attainable individually.... [It] also involves learning how to recognize the patterns of interaction in teams that undermine learning.*<sup>9</sup>

Nowadays, before asking people to apply the principles of Action Science I invite them to take time to rediscover what it means to dialogue. I have created a prayer from the ideas in William Isaac's seminal book on the subject<sup>10</sup> and I often lead people into quiet time before reciting it. I think this is an example of how we in Christian communities can open up to theories and practices in management that are value based and people centred. It seems to me that in our Christian meetings we often baptise the worst secular models refusing to realise that there are excellent practices available.

*Lord give us a profound capacity to listen. Help us recognise how well we are listening right now. Enable us in silence to enter our feelings with care and honesty. Let us be truly present to self that we may be more present to one another. Slow us down that we may be aware of any disturbance in self, any memory that is still creating noise in us. Give us the courage to face any resistance within, teach us to pay attention, to recognise resistance in us to what others are saying. Let us be still that we may learn to listen together. Make us aware of how selective we are when we listen, how driven we are when we listen. Help us live lightly with these human deficiencies. Give us the spirit that enables us connect intimately with one another without being intrusive. Take us from listening alone to listening as one. Remove us from the fear that prevents us from sharing our dilemmas.*

Here is the response of a member of a parish staff to the use of that prayer and an exercise I offered in how to dialogue:

*The meeting allowed for an opportunity to express my perception of the behaviour and attitudes of the other staff members and to receive feedback regarding the accuracy of those perceptions. This conversation in turn afforded the opportunity to hear how others understood me and to lessen and ease tensions arising*

*from failure to express these perceptions in the past. In addition, the meeting was cooperative, giving hope to the group that other meetings of staff could be as well (and indeed have been), leading to an openness to the possibility of formation of a vision statement (not yet in place) and to working from a sense of vision for the parish (getting there).*

Now listen to David Tracy, Professor of Theology in University of Chicago:

*Conversation is a game with some hard rules. Say only what you mean, say it as accurately as you can. Listen to and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to connect or defend your opinions if challenged by the conversation, be willing to argue if necessary, to confront if demanded, to endure necessary conflict, to change your mind if the evidence suggests it... What conversation is to the life of understanding, solidarity must be to the life of action.<sup>11</sup>*

What do you think?



## Learn To Listen Together To The Spirit of God

*'Incline your ear and come to me; Listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant'. (Isaiah 55:3)*

In forming teams and communities for whatever purpose in ministry I spend considerable time inviting people to come to agreement of the norms that they wish. I assume nothing. People need to find for themselves the levels of trust and confidentiality. Then need to search for ways that they can articulate their values and beliefs before shaping an agreement for the project. It took my visit to Boston for me to realise that we in Scotland have a history of covenant-making that holds rich insights into how we can choose to work with one another in the Lord. Perhaps being a Catholic in Scotland blinded me to the best of this aspect of the Christian tradition. We have much to learn together about making covenants in the third millennium. Here is an example of a group covenant from recent work in Scotland:



### **We covenant with one another in the Lord to:**

- \* Maintain confidentiality: what is said among us remains among us
- \* Be mutually responsible for keeping our disclosures appropriate
- \* Use “I” statements and own our own feeling and beliefs
- \* Be gentle with one another when pointing out blind spots
- \* Be responsible for hearing the wisdom of every person in the group
- \* Take time to reflect on feedback given by others
- \* Participate responsibly in the task and process of our encounters
- \* Be present to one another listening with care and compassion
- \* Have respect for time-frame renegotiating it when required
- \* Choose to be tough on the issues and gentle with each person
- \* Strive to sense the movement of God’s Spirit in our deliberations<sup>12</sup>



### **Promote Creative Learning**

I facilitate learning by inviting people to build community and enhance this by pulling in theories and practices that encourage them to become an effective team. Sometimes that means relying on the teachings of ‘Communities of Practice’ where the trick is not to impose your model but to recognise where the real learning is happening. When they have reached a level of development that enables that to hear and understand the value of both positive and negative feedback I introduce Action Science instruments. ‘The Left hand Column’<sup>13</sup> and ‘The Ladder of Inference’<sup>14</sup> An example of the application would be in a supervision group where these techniques help participants stay close to the raw data. In surfacing what we actually said and did we are helped to spot how in threatening and embarrassing situations we design our practice and that design is different from what we espouse. The use of Action Science enhances the information, evaluation and analysis stages of supervision by zooming in on errors we make not so much in our espoused theories but in the way we design our practice, in the way we act. Action is not just what we do, it is what we say and what we think.

What do you think?

- <sup>1</sup> Joe Raelin. Knowles Chair, North Eastern University Boston. (Work-Based Learning Prentice Hall, 2000)
- <sup>2</sup> John Shea 'Gospel Light: Jesus Stories For Spiritual Consciousness' Crossroad Pub NY. 1998 page 99
- <sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, page 43
- <sup>4</sup> Anita Farber Robertson, *Learning While Leading: Increasing Your Effectiveness in Ministry*, Alban Institute, 2000
- <sup>5</sup> Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of The Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 182.
- <sup>6</sup> Argyris, Chris, Robert Putnam and Dianna McLain Smith *Action Science: Concepts Methods and Skills for Research and Intervention*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985. (Page 61)
- <sup>7</sup> Kenneth Pohly. *Transforming the Rough Places: The Ministry of Supervision*. Whaleprints, 1993
- <sup>8</sup> Kenneth Pohly, *op. cit.*, p.83.
- <sup>9</sup> Peter M Senge *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of The Learning Organization*, New York: Doubleday 1994, p.10
- <sup>10</sup> William Isaacs, *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*, New York: Doubleday 1999
- <sup>11</sup> David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion and Hope*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1998, p.113.
- <sup>12</sup> Extract from a group facilitation by Catherine Butler and Michael Burns 2004
- <sup>13</sup> Argyris, Chris, Robert Putnam and Dianna McLain Smith, *Action Science: Concepts Methods and Skills for Research and Intervention*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985, p.340
- <sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 246