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CHRIS JOHNSON

Leading from Within: Peer-Learning Consultations to Explore Our Callings and Campus Capacities for Leadership

What inner landscapes and campus terrain do we navigate concerning our individual and collective work with leadership? What ideas and insights, questions and conundrums do we hold in this work, around which we could benefit from the wisdom and deep listening of our colleagues? In his 2014 workshop at the Vocation of a Lutheran College Conference, Dr. Chris Johnson utilized exercises in deep listening and what might be thought of as a “modified clearness committee” approach—with its roots in the Quaker tradition—to invite participants to learn from one another as they live out their leadership callings. Reproduced here are his introductory comments and guidance, as well selections from the resources distributed at the conference.



Education for vocation is the *hallmark* of Lutheran higher education. It is what makes us *distinctive* in the larger landscape. One might even say that “vocation” is the vocation of a Lutheran college. What is more, the vocation of leadership, and leadership as a key aspect of vocation, is in our institutional DNA.

Vocational leadership is also *soul work*. The rigors and hungers of the leadership that we’re called to offer in these times demand that we show up fully and authentically. It demands that our work be rooted in the deepest soil of ourselves-in-relation-with-all-there-is and that we draw on the nourishing reservoirs of spirit to sustain our work

over the long haul. In using the language of spirituality I’m informed by the broadly inclusive understanding of scholar and author Sharon Daloz Parks, who writes:

The etymology of the word *spirit* directs us to such roots as “air,” “breath,” “wind”—a sense of *power moving unseen*. Spiritual consciousness acknowledges that there is more to life than we can directly see and touch, an intuition of mystery, depth, and meaning at the essence of our experience of life. A “spiritual” sensibility can be as intimate as our in-most thoughts and feeling, and at the same time

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it can be evoked and informed by the vastness of the universe in which we dwell.

When we speak of the human being as a spiritual being, we acknowledge an animating essence at the core of our lives—our experience of awe and wonder and our capacity to be moved, vulnerable, compassionate, loyal, tender, loving, insightful, excited, curious, engaged, and sometimes outraged....While the word spirituality is too often used in ways that feel ungrounded, careless, and even deluded, we also know that there are times when we are in the presence of someone who seems deeply authentic in a way that manifests a quality we best describe as spiritual, that is, attuned to some larger knowing...that yields a paradoxical sense of both gravitas and freedom.

A spiritual sensibility arises, in part, from the intellectual capacity to apprehend more than the immediate and the partial and to have an intuitive grasp of the whole. Spiritual sensibility evokes a sense of the whole of time, space, and possibility....The capacity to recognize the connectivity and the interdependence of all things (seen and unseen) and to discern fitting action within that wholeness is a part of what we mean when we speak of that which is authentically spiritual, and it is the ground of the most profound moral and ethical commitments. Seeing life as an interdependent whole...can give rise to the courage to risk something big for something good. It can give rise to a sense of “calling”—the conviction that Life asks something of us and we respond, can be responsible. (Parks, “Leadership” 4-5)

Finally, vocational leadership, perhaps especially as we practice and develop it in higher education, calls for us to *cultivate a robust ecology of capacities and qualities*—in ourselves and in those we serve—that include but go beyond important “knowledge” and “skills.” Vocational leadership requires, for example, that we activate not just the conscious mind but the deep mind (see Zajonc). It’s about not just the what and the how, the strategies and techniques, as important as they are; it’s also—and perhaps primarily—about the why and the who. It’s not just about “doing” things that leaders (or scholars, or teachers)

do but about “being” a leader (or a teacher, or a parent, or a community member). It calls for an intuitive, contemplative, quiet yet keenly attentive mind—and a listening heart that is adept with artful discernment, perspective-taking,

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expansive imagination, mindful presence, trust and trustworthiness. Vocational leadership is about evoking and inviting others’ best selves to co-create a story that is worthy of our callings.

Stories of Self, Us, and Now

We live in a culture that thirsts for meaning; people hunger for a sense of wholeness and purpose. We also live in what Sharon Parks calls a time of unprecedented peril *and* unprecedented promise in our lives and communities, in this democracy, and on the planet. In the increasingly high-stakes marketplace of higher education, moreover, colleges and universities are having to ask themselves very important and challenging questions: What is the purpose and value of what we do, for the student and for the world? What differentiates an education at, say, an ELCA-related college or university from one offered somewhere else? What *matters* about the teaching and learning, the scholarship and advising, the discovery and creative work that we do—beyond simply credentialing students for jobs (as important as that surely is) or “training” them for a “successful life” in our consumer culture? How can what we do make a substantive and positive difference in these unprecedented times, and in people’s lives?

Questions such as these raise further questions about our own lives and work—and about the kind of story we want to live by in order to be our best selves and to co-create a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world. These questions point to yet more fundamental questions for ourselves as educators and for our institutions: Toward

what kind of story—toward what vision of the world as it could and should be—do we want our work to contribute? Into what kind of story do we hope our students will live?

Human beings are storied and story-making creatures; story is how we seek to understand who we are and how we should live. Harvard scholar and community organizer Marshall Ganz writes about what he calls “public narrative,” which has at its heart three interrelated stories: “a story of why I have been called, *a story of self*; a story of why we have been called, *a story of us*; and a story of the urgent challenge on which we are called to act, *a story of now*” (qtd by Palmer 166, emphasis added). The exercises described at the end of this essay use these three interlocking “stories” as a framework to help us to explore the personal, relational, institutional, and even global dimensions of vocational leadership.

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A “story of self” communicates who I am—my beliefs and values, my experiences, why I do what I do, why I’ve been called. It helps me to answer the question, Who am I, and why am I here? It helps me to understand and to describe my identity and the inner and outer contours of my daily life. A “story of us” sees who we are through a lens of connection and relationship, of shared values and experience. It communicates who we are—our shared values, our shared experience, and why we do what we do; why we’ve been called. It answers, “Whose” am I, and what’s my place in the world?

The relational spin of a story of us, by the way, is suggested by the shared etymology of our English words *pub*, *public*, and *puberty*. In the culture that gave us the shared root of these words “puberty” referred not to the dreaded teenage-hormone-inflamed years we couldn’t wait to escape, but rather the developmental time when a person matured into the responsibilities of a citizen, to help to shoulder the challenges of *public* life. “Pub,”

similarly, is short for “public house,” where community members of every stripe gather to celebrate the gifts and work out the challenges of their shared, common, *public* life. By suggesting this way of thinking about the story of us I do not mean to elicit nightmares about bodily fluids, or about hanging out at bars and drinking to oblivion. Instead I’m trying to point us to the fundamental human capacity for connection and interdependence that equips us to live more deeply, across the lifespan, into qualities and capacities of commitment to the common good.

A “story of now,” finally, is a story of the urgent challenge to which we’ve been called to respond; it points to a way of seeing the world that “transforms the present into a moment of challenge, hope, and choice” (Ganz). It expresses our lived answers to the question, Who are the times we live in calling me to be? And again: What are they calling us to do in the here and now?

Not Your Normal Story

Our colleges provide fertile soil for engaging every member of the community in the crucial life-work of developing and aligning their own stories of self, us, and now—stories that can help them to tap into the deep soil of their best selves and orient their lives toward helping to create a more just and peaceful world. By way of contrast, the writer Ellen Goodman describes what could be thought of as prevalent “master narrative” in twenty-first century American culture when she observes that “normal life” in our society is “getting dressed in clothes you buy for work, driving through traffic in a car you’re still paying for, in order to get to the job you need so you can pay for the clothes, the car, and the house you leave empty all day in order to afford to live in it” (qtd in DeGraaf, Wann, and Naylor 36).

In this dominant cultural story people are seen in individualistic terms, are largely defined by their work, and are valued by measure of their accomplishments (or their failures) and their “stuff.” Life is about the daily grind, going through motions, staying on the hamster wheel, moving continually faster, striving for “more.” The part of the story that focuses on college too often assumes a vision of education as “credentialing” for employment (the job you need for the clothes, car, and house), and the student is seen as little more than a passive consumer of the commodities of knowledge and skills that are delivered

by experts. Leadership, moreover, is often thought of and practiced in a hierarchical, command-and-control, top-down, “yell-louder” manner, as the purview of people who hold formal roles or positions of power. But for the sake of what, and at what cost? In so many ways, life in this culturally dominant story seems to be deeply unhealthy, resulting in burnout or breakdown of self, relationships, communities, and the planet.

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But of course “normal” is not the only story we might live by. The heritage, missions, and core values of our colleges and universities point to a powerful alternative, which can be summarized by the word “vocation.” As we know the word simply means calling, invitation, or summons, and is related (via the Latin *vox*) to the word “voice.” Vocation can be described as a calling to live out your distinctive gifts, passions, and sense of meaning or purpose in ways that benefit the community and help address the world’s deep needs. Vocation is how you live out who you most truly are, in and for the world. Vocation can be thought of as a way of understanding what it is to be human, what it is to be a person or a “self,” through four interconnected lenses:¹

1. Persons are *gifted*, both in terms of discerning and nourishing their gifts, talents, skills, competencies, strengths, interests, and passions, and in terms of knowing that their very lives are gifts to be cherished and shared with others. Giftedness grows out of and expresses a capacity to live one’s life with a “posture” of awe and gratitude—theologically, a posture of grateful response to grace—rather than one of entitlement, fear, or cynicism.
2. Persons are *free*, that is, free *from* the need to conform to social norms and practices that are ultimately damaging to their spirit and destructive

of community and the planet, or *from* the need to earn God’s favor through “good works,” or *from* prejudice and narrow-mindedness—as well as free *for* a life of meaning, passion, and purpose in service to the neighbor, free *for* a hope-filled life of courageous willingness to risk for others and to stand up for justice.

3. Persons are *nested* within or connected to realities and relationships that are greater than themselves: to community, for example, or to a cause that evokes care and action, key relationships, a healthful environment, God, or a hopeful future. Vocation grows out of and expresses a sense of the self not primarily as an isolated, independent, individualistic unit but rather as fundamentally relational, interdependent, and interconnected with one another, the Earth, and all there is.
4. Persons *matter*; they have agency and efficacy and make decisions and actions that are meaningfully their own (e.g., at least partly within their control and subject to rational deliberation) and do in fact matter in the lives of others. Mattering grows out of and expresses a sense that their lives have significance, a sense that they have a role in the larger working out of the meaning of things, a sense that the choices they make and the actions they take really do make a positive difference to others.

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Vocation provides grist for a story of *self* as gifted and free, a story of *us* that emphasizes the fundamental connectedness of the self, and a story of *now* that sees every person as mattering in response to the challenges and opportunities of these times. Our colleges recognizes, moreover, that the need in these times is for the practices and gifts of what Parks calls “mentoring environments”

or “mentoring communities.” She points out that if our aim is to mentor young adults into the world as it is—or put differently, to prepare them to live “normal” lives—an individual mentor is enough. In order to be mentored into the world *as it could be*, however, a mentoring community is needed. By “mentoring community,” Parks means not just a community of individual mentors, but a community whose shared narratives, practices, discourse, and culture collectively mentor all its members toward lives of contribution to a just and peaceful society that works for all. A mentoring community thinks about human becoming in the largest and most profound frames, as we make the most extraordinary decisions about how we need to heal and co-create the world (Parks, *Big Questions* 174).

This last piece is crucial since, as Parks points out, even the Mafia is a mentoring community (253). In other words, it is important that our institutions continually ask the “for the sake of *what*” question—we teach, advise, mentor, learn, and lead “for the sake of *what*?” And for those of us who work in these places: What are we doing here, really? Why do we do what we do, in the way we do it? Do we really want our work to be about simply training and credentialing students for “normal” life—in that going-through-the-motions, hamster-wheel, burn-out-and-breakdown sense of the word? With education for vocation as the hallmark of our institutions, what is the story that we want our—and our students’—lives and work to be about (see Braskamp and Wergin)?

Hearing Yourself

In response to the ideas and questions I’ve been posing so far, what do you hear yourself saying? Take a few minutes to reflect on these prompts:

- How would you describe your “story of self?” Who are you, really, and how does that person “show up” in your vocational leadership?
- How would you describe your “story of us”—your sense of connection and community, your sense of responsibility for others and of your contribution to a bigger picture?
- How would you describe your “story of now”? Who are these times calling you to be, and what are they calling you to do?

And in terms of our shared work around vocational leadership:

- Toward what kind of story do we want to guide, mentor, and educate our students?
- What is the story that shapes, guides, and sustains your own life, work, and vocational leadership?
- How do you understand and put into practice the power of story, of “big questions,” of mindful presence, of intentional pause, and of deep listening—in your life, your work, and your leadership?

Practice in Community

At this point, the 2014 Vocation of a Lutheran College attendees divided themselves into pairs or triads to participate in exercises of deep listening or a modified version of clearness consultation. The spirit of each is the same, in that in both cases the emphasis is on being fully present to the other person(s), asking questions that are about them and their story—and not about you, your stories, or your curiosity. The point to each is also listening without succumbing to the understandable temptation to want to “fix” the other person.

Deep Listening

The paired “deep listening” exercise invited partners to tell stories from their own experiences related to the focus of our gathering.² Mary Rose O’Reilly, in her book *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice*, writes of the power of deep listening: “One can, I think, *listen someone into existence*, encourage a stronger self to emerge or a new talent to flourish.” And in learning to listen well, one can also learn to be *listened to*, “to be able to stand being heard. It’s frightening because true attention... invites us to change.” She continues:

Attention: deep listening. People are dying in spirit for lack of it. In [our] culture most listening is critical listening. We tend to pay attention only long enough to develop a counterargument; we critique the student’s or the colleague’s ideas; we mentally grade and pigeon-hole each other.... People often listen with an agenda, to sell or petition or seduce. Seldom is there a deep, openhearted, unjudging reception of the other. And so

we all talk louder and more stridently and with a terrible desperation. By contrast, if someone truly listens to me, my spirit begins to expand. (17-21)

In this exercise, pairs take turns listening to each other about things that matter. They are invited to use the questions below as openings or invitations without trying to use them as a script. Each listens to her or his partner carefully for the full time allotted, asking some of the following questions and/or some others of her or his own. The exercise is not intended to be primarily a two-way conversation (although there will of course be some natural “give-and-take”). Instead, participants devote all of

“Participants devote all of their attention to the selected partner for the entire time, providing a safe, courageous space of attuned hospitality to whatever the partner wishes to share as she or he explores the landscapes into which the questions lead.”

their attention to the selected partner for the entire time, providing a safe, courageous space of attuned hospitality to whatever the partner wishes to share as she or he explores the landscapes into which the questions lead.

After a short break, partners switch roles. The new listeners again simply *listen* and *attend*, and the new speakers use their turn to explore, however they wish, the terrain opened up for them by the questions. By the time partners are finished, they should also have an understanding about what each would like to remain confidential. Guiding questions particularly attuned to the theme of leadership include the following:

1. Tell me a quick story about yourself—anything you like, but something that goes a little deeper than the typical surface-level small talk—that you think could help me begin to get to know “the real you.” How does that person—the real you—tend to show up in your leadership?
2. Tell me a story about a time when you feel like you “failed” as a leader. How has that experience affected

you and your leadership over time? What have you learned? Now tell me a story of a time when you “succeeded” as a leader? How has *that* experience affected you and your leadership over time? What have you learned? What differences do you see in yourself (and your leadership) when you compare and contrast those two experiences? Who are you when you’re leading at your very best?

3. For what do you need to listen, what voice/Voice do you need to hear, at this point in your leadership? What tends to interfere with your capacity to listen? How might you “turn down the volume” of your life so that you can listen and hear more deeply?
4. At the intersection of your institution’s gifts and the needs of the world, what is your institution’s vocation of leadership? In other words, what is your institution’s “deep purpose” with regard to leadership? Given who your institution really is and aspires to become, and given the hungers and needs of the world, why should it bother to care about leadership, and what does it need to do in order to live more fully into its leadership calling? What are the implications of all this for you and your work?
5. What is a question or concern about your vocation of leadership that seems to be tugging or whispering at the edge of your awareness these days?

Clearness Consultation

Clearness consultations are driven by the needs of each member of the triad and so do not include prepared questions. Instead, each person has an allotted time (at the conference, 25 minutes each) to explore a question, issue, challenge, dilemma, or conundrum of their choice, whether related to the topic of our gathering or otherwise. The other two members of the triad only ask “open, honest questions,” always keeping in mind that there is to be “no fixing, no saving, no advising, and no correcting.” At the end of the allotted time participants take a short pause and rotate to a new focus person.

According to Parker Palmer:

Behind the Clearness Committee is a simple but crucial conviction: *each of us has an inner teacher, a voice of truth, that offers the guidance and power we need to deal with our problems.* But that inner voice

is often garbled by various kinds of inward and outward interference. The function of the Clearness Committee is not to give advice or “fix” people from the outside in but rather to help people remove the interference so that they can discover their own wisdom from the inside out. (“Clearness Committee”)

The session begins by triads moving to chosen spaces in silence. They are invited to sit quietly and comfortably in a small face-to-face circle. The first focus person will break the silence when she or he is ready to begin; the other two take notes (which they give to the focus person) and someone watches the time so the focus person doesn’t have to. After an allotted time for open-ended questions, the time-keeper will ask the focus person if she or he wants committee members to mirror back what they have heard (without interpretation or advice-giving), or to continue with open and honest questions.

Here are some select, additional guidelines for asking open and honest questions, which are adapted from the work of the Center for Courage and Renewal (and its network of facilitators) and based on suggestions by Parker Palmer (“Clearness Committee”):

1. The best single mark of an honest, open question is that you can’t possibly anticipate the answer to it, nor think while asking it: “I know the right answer to this and I sure hope you give it to me!” So, “Have you ever thought about seeing a therapist?” is not an open and honest question! But “What did you learn from the experience you just told us about?” is.
2. Ask questions aimed at helping the focus person to explore her or his concern rather than satisfying your own curiosity.
3. Ask questions that are brief and to the point rather than weighing them down with background considerations and rationale that allow you to slip in your own opinions or advice, or turn them into stories about yourself.
4. Ask questions that go to the person as well as the problem—questions about the person’s inner life as well as the outward facts.
5. As you listen deeply to what is being said try to allow questions to come from your heart, rather than only from your head.

6. Sometimes questions that invite images or metaphors can open things up in ways that more direct questions don’t. At the same time, remember that the best questions tend to be fairly simple: clear, clean, brief (but not “simplistic”).
7. Allow questions to “bubble up” or emerge, rather than force them. Remember, this isn’t about you, and it’s not a contest—so don’t worry about whether your questions outshine others’ questions
8. Consider holding a question rather than asking it immediately, particularly if you’re not sure it’s a good question. If you’re not sure, sit with a while and wait for clarity. If it keeps coming back to you, ask it later.
9. Watch the pacing of your questions. Questions coming too fast can feel aggressive and might cut off reflection. Allow for space. Trust the silences. Breathe.

Conclusion

In my many years of teaching, conducting workshops, and facilitating retreats I have seen that there is great power—personally, professionally, and institutionally—in deep listening, powerful questions, courageous reflection, live encounter with difference and otherness: all crucial skills and capacities of vocational leadership. An academic mentoring community offers safe, courageous space for people to discover, explore, and claim their stories in the

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company of others. Inviting people to explore their stories of self, us, and now, and to listen with deep presence, is to invite them to be more intentional about the choices they face in their interconnectedness, more authentic and purposeful in their freedom and agency, and more energized and effective in their work and leadership.

Attention to vocation can help us to see that the world calls us simultaneously more deeply into and more

vigorously *out* of ourselves. Vocation opens up the space to consider more humane and truthful ways of being in the world than those that tend to be offered by the dominant cultural stories. Reflection on questions of vocation, in the company of deeply listening others, helps us to map the deep architecture and the overarching stories of our lives, the foundational structures or frameworks of belief and

value, attitude and action that hold our lives together. This kind of integrative learning involves both an inward and an outward dynamic: A spiraling inward toward the depths of self, meaning, and faith, and outward into an ever-expanding world of community and effective action, for the sake of a more hopeful future.

Endnotes

1. Many thanks to our colleague Darrell Jodock, who helped to formulate this way of thinking about vocation at Gustavus Adolphus College, St. Peter Minnesota, and at many of our colleges and universities.

2. This exercise was developed by Dr. Chris Johnson, ©The Milkweed Group, LLC and influenced by, among others, Jim Keen's "Lives of Commitment" workshop; Matthew Fox, *The Reinvention of Work: A New Vision of Livelihood for Our Time* (San

Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994); Claudia Horwitz, *The Spiritual Activist: Practices To Transform Your Life, Your Work, and Your World* (New York: Penguin Compass, 2002); Judy Brown, *The Art and Spirit of Leadership* (Trafford, 2012); Larry A. Braskamp, "Leading as a Spiritual Endeavor: Living, Leading, and Developing Community with Vocation," *Spirituality in Higher Education* newsletter, June 2008, Vol. 4 Issue 3; and Parker Palmer, *The Courage To Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998, 2007).

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