THE ART AND SOUL OF LUTHERAN EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

Education in a Lutheran setting is both a science and an art with the art aspect predominating. Much is written about the science of leadership but today I will be concentrating my comments on the art and soul of leadership. In 2003 I gave the Reuther Oration at the National Principals Conference – this was a scholarly piece (and I gather somewhat controversial); today I will be on my best behaviour and I hope to provide some reflections rather than academic research alone.

My comments are seven in number – a good number because in a biblical sense this is the number of completion or fullness, and has its ‘genesis’ in the seven days of creation. I will begin with the theme of the first day of creation and end with the theme of the seventh day but I will put my own take on the days in between.

Day 1.
In Genesis Ch1 we read…. “And the power of God was moving over the water…” what was God doing brooding over the waters? – I think He was watching over every detail of the creation – He was being present in this space.

As leaders we too need to be present – really present in our spaces. Being present is not just turning off your phone or resisting the urge to answer emails (even if surreptitiously) it means turning up physically, mentally and emotionally to the task at hand!

I have been to meetings where a phone rings and the person answers the phone and leaves the meeting to talk; my friends you are either present at the meeting or you are present for your phone or other device – you shouldn’t attend to both.

Being present is not only about being present for people at meetings it is about being present, truly present for staff, present for students, present for parents and present for community members.

It is also about being present for partners and friends and children. This means more than just being present in the room it means turning up emotionally as well.

AND it means being present in prayer and present when reading and engaging with God’s word.
In short it means being present with purpose at home and at work.

**Day 2. ....Separating the sky from the land ....**

....Separating what you will share and what you will keep to yourself...

So many of us keep our best thoughts and our best programs and our best teachers to ourselves. We do this often to protect our good reputation in the community, or we keep them to ourselves in order to maintain our competitive edge over neighbouring schools, including Lutheran schools, or we keep our best hidden because it will be a useful asset in winning our next appointment. Whatever the reasons and no matter how good they are, secrecy and concealment do nothing to raise the tide of Lutheran education and remember a rising tide floats all boats.

Competition will always be with us, but Andy Hargreaves and others use a term which I believe instructs us well in our leadership futures namely the concept of ‘collaborative competition’.
We note that teacher competition inhibits collaboration; in a similar way Principal to Principal competition inhibits collaboration AND collaboration is critical to deep and meaningful improvement. Andy Hargreaves’ research, found that collaboration between competing schools amounted to an amazing educational growth in all schools. One of the points he makes is this, focus first on collaboration and the competition will take care of itself.

How often have we been fixated on competitive pursuits to the diminishment of educational improvement? Too often, much too often I have seen learning communities concentrate on survival (competition does that) rather than thrival (collaboration does that).

**Day 3.**

Creation of... land, sea plants and animals....

My next reflection was stimulated by a devotion Heather Waring gave. Heather used a piece of paper bark as a prop to illustrate that the tree sheds its bark so that a more comfortable skin size (which accommodates new growth) can come through. We all need to shed old skin or old ways in order for a new skin, new change, to come forth. Indeed in terms of our bodies scabs which form after cuts and abrasions...
actually cover new skin, new healing; further, the scabs need to come away in order for the new skin to show itself and to do what it is designed to do.

In a few days I will be leaving the LSA … I don't think I am a scab… but I do believe I am an old piece of bark that needs to come away from the tree in order for the new growth underneath to develop and protect the tree. From this I note two positive things 1. I was an important and necessary part of the LSA tree for 7 years and 2. I did what no one else could do at that time i.e. I was the correct bark for that part of the tree during that time.

Next year the LSA will have new bark ……a new team structure at the LSA and I am excited by the potential blessings this can bring to all learning communities. The inner wood, first begun under Barry Kahl’s leadership, is not dead wood but rather is there to support and give strength to the new. The inner wood is not where the new growth or the real activity of the tree is; the growth occurs near the outside of the tree (bark and cambium layers) and at the extremities - the leaves. The lesson here is don't be afraid to operate, at times, at the margins or to use a pun don't be afraid to go out on a limb! Allow me to go a little further. Some of the innovations I see in education are little more than random ideas - a flurry of growth of extra leaves if you like which are easily blown off the tree in high winds or wither under the heat of the first hot day. Real growth, real innovation has a base; for us in Lutheran education it's base is grounded in our theology, it is deeply connected to educational philosophy, it is carefully thought through BUT like the gospel of Jesus it is radical in so many ways.

We in education need to avoid the reversion to inner structures - we need to respond to the emerging social and educational trends before us because education after all is about what it means to be human in a contemporary world, and what it means to participate in humanity and, for us as Christians, it engages us in the solution to the problem of sin.

We, each leader, are a tree and although we belong to the LSA plantation of trees, we need to maximise our individuality because imagination, creativity and innovation thrive on individual giftedness. The soon to be released Growing Deep document (a true twenty first century document) has growth as individual leaders as its core focus – and I warmly commend this document to you.
Day 4
Creation of …Sun, moon, stars and lights….
Shining some light.

Museums house the important relics of the past but they are often dark and musty places. You can dust the cabinets and even paint the walls but the fossils protected there are still the same.

Schools and school systems shouldn’t be museums as I have just described them. Rather we should be galleries of contemporary art – galleries of modern education if you like. Schools should be modern spaces of contemporary practice, they should be modern spaces of Christianity in practice for after all they are the Church for thousands of people in our communities. NO the Church (universal) is not necessarily going to die as some doom sayers herald because we have thousands and thousands of people in our Lutheran School Churches 5 days a week 40 weeks each year. It is what we do with this opportunity which matters the most.

A warning! We, Lutheran Educators must not be the minders of the museum as some in the Church are doing. At the recent synod in relation to women’s ordination, 1/3 of the delegates managed to retain their life’s passion namely, to ‘mind the museum’. 1/3 of delegates won the dubious task to protect the fossils of the past and to force the rest of us to endure the achingly slow process not of death (for that may have already come for elements of the institutionalised church) but of fossilisation itself. How sad is that?

Day 5
Creation of all insects, birds, living things…

David Attenborough points out in his hundreds of documentaries the fragility of our plants and animals in the face of human domination of the planet. My next point relates to the fragility of those in our learning communities who have little or no power.

People have dreams.
I have learnt much in my role as Deputy – one of the learnings, resulting from a reflection on my time as Principal for 36 years, is that leaders have large amounts of power and that the power difference between staff and Principal can mean that staff are sometimes trodden on. Not physically trodden on, rather their ideas and hopes and dreams are
trodden on (sometimes with just a throwaway line – like, “Get real” in response to a request).

William Butler Yeats in his poem “He wishes for the cloths of heaven” says this:

Had I the heavens’ embroidered cloths,
(Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,)
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly, because you tread on my dreams.

I now recognise (all too late) that I didn’t always tread softly on the dreams of my staff and maybe on your dreams too – for this am I am deeply sorry. I recognise also (again too late) that I probably didn’t always tread softly on the dreams of the most important people in our schools the students – and students are the reason that we even exist. I can’t change what has happened but I can share with you the possibility of treading softly on the dreams of those with whom you work and that too includes the dreams of our precious students.

Day 6

……..Creation of people ……..

People are created differently and need to be cared for in different ways.

People have hearts AND leaders have hearts

For Jesus, leading begins with the heart; the leader’s heart. From Jesus’ teaching I consider that being an effective and deep leader you need to connect your heart with the heart of those whom you lead. To be a deep leader your heart needs to beat at the same rate as your followers. If they are walking slowly then you will too. If you know they are in pain then your heart rate will respond accordingly. If you need to do heavy lifting with those whom you lead then your heart rate should be elevated to circulate oxygen for the emotional and physical task at hand. Servant leading is not about being trodden on by those whom you serve, that is ‘slaveship’, rather it is about empowering those around you to be the people, the workers, the servants, the leaders that God gifted them to be. It means being in the middle of the crowd; the middle of the action; the middle of the mess AND it means being on the sidelines bending to
tie shoelaces and patch up skun knees. In short, it means being connected with people in touchable and tangible ways.

Jesus was and is a servant leader. He entered the dust of this world in order to serve us and he bled and died so that he could be connected with each one of us. Today he still leads because he still connects his heart with us; his heart beats at the same rate as his followers. If we are walking slowly then he will too. If he knows we are in pain then his heart rate will respond accordingly. And if our heart bleeds then he bleeds with us.

Servant leadership is all about the heart; our hearts connected with the heart of Jesus the ultimate leader.

Day 7

......on the 7th Day God rested....

The concept of grace - simple and pure as it is, is always going to be difficult to present and practise in a secular context ....... especially when evil forces are at work - no wonder your work is draining, challenging, even difficult at times. The antidote to these challenges is REST. Rest comes in different shapes and sizes for different people. I believe how you plan for, manage and experience REST has a huge impact on the learning outcomes in your workplace!

Pay and be paid as you go.

On life’s journey I have had a practice of "pay and be paid as you go", consequently, as I leave the LSA fold I consider I owe the LSA nothing and most certainly the LSA owes me nothing. I have unfortunately heard all too often the phrase, "because of all my service to Lutheran Schools or my service to the Church" with the implication that the Church or LSA or the School owes them something. To my mind this selfish, egocentric, self-importance has no substance and therefore no merit and deserves to be repudiated in the strongest terms. Indeed such an attitude is totally counterproductive to rest.

Rest in God and rest in yourself

In recent times a new concept has entered sociology and other spaces and it is the concept of self-compassion. We know about self-esteem (self-love) which I think is massively over overrated and has caused untold damage; we know about self-efficacy (self-belief to achieve a task) which is a far more constructive concept for ourselves and our learners; now we have self-compassion (unconditional self-forgiveness). Self-compassion is simply being forgiving of yourself; when you have made a mistake instead of beating yourself up for days and days
(sometimes longer) forgive yourself - go softly on yourself – rest in the assurance that you are forgiven and you can also forgive yourself.

Finally, three thank you’s (in addition to a daily gratitude to God for creating me and lovingly sustaining me):

1. Thank you to my wife Jenny who has unconditionally supported me during my 44 years in education for that I say THANK YOU which seems rather inadequate given the sacrifices she has made to her own career.
2. Thank you to John, and the LSA secretariat for making me look good when I really didn’t deserve it and for helping me to flourish and, importantly, for treading softly on my dreams.
3. To everyone else present thank you all for allowing me to be part of your journey during the past 7 years BUT more importantly thank you for being part of my journey - my life has been the richer for that.

Summary:

Education - Lutheran Education is about the exploration of what it means to be human (deeply human); what it means to participate in humanity (with conviction) and what we do about the problem of sin.

AND Lutheran Education is about grace. Grace covers sin; grace covers what it means to be human AND grace covers over what it means to participate in humanity…..so in the end it is all about grace or, if you listen carefully to Nardia Bolz-Webber, a Lutheran female pastor, it is all about grace or it is nothing at all.

It’s all about grace or its nothing at all….and that my friends is the soul of Lutheran Education.

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